



JOHN HOLDEN
UNIONIST




By

T. C. De Leon.

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"WELL DONE, SIR!"—Page 208.

John Holden, Unionist,

A Romance of the Days of Destruction
and Reconstruction

BY

T. C. DE LEON

AUTHOR OF

"JUNY, OR ONLY ONE OCTOROON'S STORY," "FOUR YEARS IN
REBEL CAPITALS," "CREOLE AND PURITAN,"
"THE PURITAN'S DAUGHTER,"
ETC.

IN COLLABORATION WITH ERWIN LEDYARD

ILLUSTRATED



ST. PAUL

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ST. PAUL MINN.

In Memory of
THAT DEAD PAST

*Whose Children were Sword and Fire; Whose living Prog-
eny are present Peace and future Hope, these pages*
WERE WRITTEN.

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SOME WORDS PREFATORY.

IN writing that series of Tales of the Border, during the late war between the states,—of which Creole and Puritan, its sequel, The Puritan's Daughter, and A Fair Blockade Breaker are a part, I have often been tempted toward a wholly new and untrodden field that lay near; and one promising rich reward to the gleaner by the proper and fearless hand.

But to work that field demanded more scope and space than the limits of a minor modern novel affords; and the harvest—such as it might be—has been again and again delayed; until the desire for its experiment grew so dominant as to push aside all engagement for, or profit from, the smaller crop; and to force the essay of the present.

In the wild and almost inaccessible mountain fastnesses of the three tangent states—Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee—lurked in hiding an irregular array of “bush-whackers,” deserters from the Southern army, and straggling skulkers from Union raids. Totally unorganized, yet banded together in some sort for purposes of self-protection, of plunder, or of nameless deeds of deviltry—these outlaws terrorized all non-combatants left at home, and often proved no contemptible opponents for the regular army raiders sent to capture, destroy, or drive them out. Agile, alert, desperate, and hopeless of mercy, they were equally cruel to the unresisting, and fearless of the armed forces sent for their protection.

Another outgrowth of the war—glibly mentioned as Loyalists, Unionists, or Scalawags, at the North—are equally misunderstood beyond the borders of the then confederated South. Some of these were men of means, education, and good social standing; original “Union-men,” from principle or reason, and anti-secessionists who had been submerged by the resistless flood of popular opinion about them. Others were the long time bitter opponents of the democratic party of their sections; always in the minority, yet grimly tenacious of their rights and princi-

ples. Others again were "loyal" from the lower motives of personal safety, or of temporary profit; but these last were chary of open expression and carried water—of the bilge description—upon both shoulders, on occasion.

Both of these products of the war time are equally unknown to the general reader of to-day, at the South as well as at the North—the very *nominis umbræ*. The busy rush of action during hostilities—the struggle for bare bread immediately after their close—prevented record by those who were near enough to study either species; and the automatic Chinese wall, reared about the belligerent South, shut out the most curious gaze of the real thinkers beyond it. And, therefore, I have endeavored to portray the Southern Unionist from principle, of the average type; the man who believed he was right and, so believing, became the fanatic through pressure of the very animosities and trials, that his moral isolation itself forced upon him.

JOHN HOLDEN is a concreted portrait; a composition of many features that came under my observation during the war. I have hope that he will be recognized as such, in more localities than the one in which he is here found placed. His son, Hank, is more directly the work of the camera. The incident of his eluding capture by the scouting squad, is a real one; as is that of the log-hut dance, where his father shoots his supposed hunter. As for the "bushwhackers," they are in no line overdrawn. With them I owe recognition to appreciated assistance from Captain Erwin Ledyard, an Alabamian of good old Tennessee stock, who served in Sand Mountain camps and scouts, after bringing three leaden souvenirs of Malvern Hill back to his own state.

Several of the other characters of this romance are actual photographs from life, as those who knew General Forrest, President "Andy" Johnson, or Judge Joseph Holt, will avouch. In many instances, their very words are used; and the interview with the president, while in no sense *verbatim*, reflects with absolute accuracy his views upon "Reconstruction" and the proper course for the Southern States to pursue; and especially his own estimate of his attitude toward congress, as expressed personally to me in his own office.

My heroines—if such they be—are not drawn from the silk clad simperers of the society novelist's models. They are photographs, if unnamed ones, of women produced by a "storm-and-stress" period unmatched in history; a

period that made courage, daring, endurance and self-sacrifice almost cheap, through their frequent finding under the young girl's bodice. If I have thrown the glamour of romance about one great act of Miss Emma Sanson, no addition was needed to illuminate the daring of her deed. That eighteen-year mountain girl sat calmly behind Forrest's saddle, piloting him across the swollen ford of Black Creek, under the galling fire of Streight's sharpshooters. Not even comment is needed upon her coolness and courage on that occasion, now passed coldly into history.

Neither have I overdrawn the seething ferment of social and political Washington in days near succedent to the war; nor the close reaction of the social or the business relation upon the political. Reared and educated at the capital, familiar with it in various aspects since—I have never seen there days so uncertain, so illogical, or so filled with smoldering of the dangerous fires of suspicion or of hate.

The sole aim of this novel is to place before its reader a plain picture of the time embraced by it; to "nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice." It was a period replete with doubt, suspicion and danger; but it was equally full of heroism, grandeur and romance.

Finally, *more meo*, I have sought to avoid manufacturing demi-gods out of the Southern—devils out of the Northern—characters of my story. I have tried to write of both, as I did in my more serious work, *Four Years in Rebel Capitals*, which received its highest meed from Northern sources; believing, as I do conscientiously, that a common race, with common ambitions inborn and developed by common educational systems, must effect much the same results, under similar circumstances. For there is more of philosophy than of sentiment in the words, now axiomatic, of the great Englishman: "Good in all, and none all-good!"

THE AUTHOR.

Mobile, Ala., February, 1893.

JOHN HOLDEN, UNIONIST.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE DESERTERS' TRAIL.

EVENING fell upon the mountain, dreary, damp and dim, with that chill in the air not infrequent, even in summer, on the southern spurs of the great Cumberland Range, when "the cloud is down upon the mountain," as the "covites" of those localities express it.

All that day long, a small and measurably dingy column of cavalry—or, as Lord Wolseley would have called them, mounted infantry—had plodded wearily around the steep and ragged curves of road, ascending Sand Mountain, in North Alabama. Its objective point was the county seat of DeKalb county, which its commander had calculated upon reaching by nightfall; but, in mountain marches, man proposes, often to find that God disposes differently. In this case Captain Shelby had found the roads execrable, loose, rutted and offering but insecure footing to his not too sure-footed mounts, from the lowlands. Besides, two wide detours from the direct route had

consumed valuable time; for this column was always making detours. Two weeks before, it had left Gadsden with orders to scout carefully through every portion of the Sand Mountain region; and to arrest every deserter and outlying conscript possible to find. If the deserters could not be caught—and those gentry often proved as slippery as eels in those days,—then it was hoped that the column could succeed in driving them across the Tennessee river, into the Federal lines; thus relieving the residents, who were loyal to the Southern flag, from their frequent threats and still more constant depredations.

The deserter from the Southern army in those days partook largely of the nature and attributes of the latter-day tramp. He left his command carrying a hunger equal to that of Gargantua; and this grew apace as he lay in hiding in the woods and mountain gorges of the three tangent states, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee. His code of ethics, moreover, was flexible enough to permit of wide-stretching construction as to the modes of gratifying his appetite, and as to differentiation of *meum* and *tuum*. Knowing that wild country thoroughly; agile, shrewd, desperate; and replacing true courage by keen cunning and cruelty to the weak,—the skulker was ever hard to trap. So, while this cavalry column's quest had shown no very large "bag" of its human game, it had already had plenty of hunting, and was pretty well tired of the chase.

Now, as it halted on the crest of a tall spur, overlooking a long, narrow and deep-cupped stretch of cove,—as the mountaineers call those patches of

more level valley, ever recurrent,—the outlook was not most cheering to the prosaic view of the tired trooper, however picturesque, as a study in grays, it might have proved to the eye of the artist.

Dipping in abrupt descent, stretched away the precipitous sides of the mountain, as though to bathe its rugged feet in the curving water-courses far below. These, wholly invisible through their screen of heavy woods, might yet be plainly traced by rising patches of white mist, dense and clearly outlined against the deep shadows of green, yet lifting smoke-like above the tree tops and floating in masses of carded wool. Further off still, loomed heavy cumuli of dense black cloud, resting low enough to blend with the dim shadow of distant woods, while lighter clouds, advancing like skirmishers, scudded swiftly across the heavens overhead—advance of the storm forces embrasured in the gloomy west. Dead stillness hung over the scene, broken only by irregular plash of moisture, as it condensed and dripped from leaf and bough. Far as eye might reach, not one glimmer of lamp or fire pierced the fast-falling gloom, to hint of habitation or of shelter.

At the head of the halted cavalry column sat two figures, advanced beyond the rest, but bearing no rank marks on their well-worn fatigue jackets. One was a bluff, jovial faced man of perhaps thirty years, his sturdy, erect frame and the commandful glance of his blue eyes alone marking him from the rest; for his untrimmed hair and beard, no less than his red-rusty boots, evidenced the passage of many weeks since Captain Tennant Shelby had bestowed much

time upon personal adornment. His companion, taller, slighter, less tanned and far more jaunty in manner as well as uniform, could not have passed his majority many months; his slight, brown mustache curving into that careful twist which speaks the frequency of prideful caress in early manhood. Lieutenant Beverly Latham was a truant, although one slight wound had already helped him to celebrate his self-given holiday. He had left the famed Virginia Military Institute two years before to follow the drum, which good fortune had combined with his horse-love and natural tastes to exchange for the bugle. From good old stock of the Old Dominion; petted at home, as only the only son may be by elder sisters; popular and bright among his classmates, while more quick than studious; devoted to pleasure and "the German,"—the young soldier had still proved that there was good stuff in him; and, while scarce fit for active service after his wound, his transfer and promotion had come together, bringing him into General Forrest's command.

"You'll catch your troop yet, Bev.," Shelby, his new captain, had said to him at the camp-fire, after a hot skirmish; adding in extenuation of prophecy, "Unless a minié ball catches you first!"

And now it was the junior who first broke the silence, as both men peered earnestly up the unpromising and fast darkening ascent.

"See here, captain," he queried, cheerily, "how much further do you suppose it is to that blessed town, where we may count upon a feast of ancient

chicken, leathery dumpling and second-hand corn dodger?"

"Something like nine mile, I guess," the senior answered; and with his words came a close, rattling peal of thunder, seemingly at their very ears, as mountain claps often sound. Next instant, the dense cloud was shorn clear across by a flash of ragged lightning, of such vivid yellow as to blind man and beast alike.

Latham's horse reared upright, coming down perilously close to the brink of the chasm, yawning black below. But the practiced hand held him in easy control, and he stood panting and trembling, but still.

Shelby backed his beast a step or two, as he said shortly:

"Pretty close, that! It's growing dark, too."

"Yes," Lathan replied, patting his horse's neck; "Night has 'drawn her sable mantle round;' but, if she have really 'pinned it with a star,' she carefully conceals that jewel from any marauder's eye. It promises a nasty night, Cap., and not far off, either."

For sole reply, Shelby gathered his horse and ranged to the column head, with the brief order: "Squad, 'tention! To the right, by twos—March!" And promptly the silence was broken by regular beat of heavy hoof and the rattle of arms, as the thick-skirting undergrowth caught the troopers, moving in double file.

"Are there any fords, or broken bridges between here and the town?" the lieutenant asked, as they again caught the dimly-seen trail.

"I believe so; but to tell the truth, Bev., it is a long time since I passed over this road, and not one of my men knows anything about it."

"Then call me into council of war, Cap., and I'll suggest to send a scout for some place nearer, where we can spend the night and make up time after daylight. I have a foolish objection to breaking my neck in a North Alabama mountain, after being shot in Virginia."

In answer to this flippant philosophy came the slow patter of great drops upon the leaves, rapidly increasing to a steady rain, while the lower descending clouds sent out their menace in dull, rumbling peals.

"You're right, Bev.," the captain answered; "tho' I don't think you were born to have your neck broken—that way. Corporal Habersham," he ordered, turning in saddle, "dismount and scout the path ahead for some crossing wagon road. We may find one leading to some sort of farm, or charcoal kiln," he added to Latham, as the trooper threw his bridle to his fellow, slung out of saddle and strode sturdily ahead, the mounted men following at slowest walk of their jaded beasts.

Suddenly both officers' horses halted, with an abrupt, jolting jerk, planting their forefeet and snorting with fear, as they stretched tense necks toward the dense growth skirting the right of the path. Simultaneously a vivid flash lit the mountain side into lurid distinctness. Simultaneously, too, both officers uttered suppressed exclamations, and Latham's right hand went instinctively to the holster

on his hip; but Shelby's firm hand touched his left arm, as it pointed into the wood. Then all was jetty darkness again, and dead stillness, broken only by the click of two revolver locks.

"Don't shoot!" the captain whispered. "It may not be a man. Wait for the next flash."

"Did you see him, too?" Latham whispered back.

"I saw a tall, white figure by that jagged chestnut-oak ahead," the senior replied, in the same tone. "It hardly seemed a man; more like a ghost!"

"Or a woman," Latham retorted. "Men don't wear white clothes in these parts; and any reputable ghost would keep indoors such a night!"

"Right; keep the spot covered," was the reply. "We'll halt and question her on the next flash."

"Bless the sex!" Latham whispered, gaily. "This wandering Venus can have my waterproof, if she'll only direct us to corn pone and supper. See!"—He interrupted himself as another flash came.

The point which both pistols covered was empty but, forty yards away from the chestnut-oak, a white, ghostly-gleaming figure flitted across the road, only to be lost in the deeper darkness quick succeeding.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The corporal's gruff challenge rang out ahead, as his carbine rattled to a ready; but only patter of the rain came for an answer, as the cautious stepping horses closed on the dismounted scout.

"What was it, corporal?"

"Blest if I know! Cap'n. It seemed either a woman, or a—"

"Not a ghost!" Latham broke in. "It was a female angel, in mountaineer form! Wherever woman is, the kitchen must be near; and I am as hungry as a wolf!"

"Which way?" queried the commander, shortly.

"Crossed to the left. a little ahead, sir," the soldier answered.

"Forward!" was the command; and a hundred paces brought the party to what had been a broad wagon track, now half overgrown with scrub, from long disuse. The scout remounted, the column turned to the left, moving very slowly and cautiously over the rough road, after each flash of lightning. But the irrepressible spirits of the lieutenant rose at the prospect of possible supper; and he quoted gaily and glibly: 'Honor to woman! To her it is given to garland dull earth with the roses of heaven!' But should she lack the roses, Cap., we'll take commutation in kind, in corn pone and bacon, and swear that they 'have been near the rose;' eh?"

"Look! There it is again!" the captain interrupted suddenly, pointing straight ahead, as the glare of a long-lived flash lit up unusual distance. And, on the very verge of the shadow, the tall white figure flitted swiftly across the cleared space; disappearing into the brush even before the gleam died into inky night once more.

"A woman, without doubt," the senior said.

"Right you are, Cap.," his junior answered. "I am no Don Juan myself, but there's no mistake this time. Shade of Epicurus! but I hope she has been out foraging. No other excuse would warrant her

being out in such weather. May the gods of appetite and of love combine to bring us to her more, or less, hospitable board!"

"It cannot be very far," the older campaigner answered. "Even a mountain woman would not risk a long tramp in such a storm. Close up, men! Forward!"

Still slowly—still moving carefully through the tough low growth—the column advanced along the now curving way; halting without command, when the flashes were long intervalled. At last the cleared path entered a straight reach; and suddenly Latham cried:

"Look! Ha! the roses at last! I smell them through the storm."

He pointed ahead as he spoke. For an instant a tall red gleam, as of an opening door, showed human habitation probable. But, even with his words, the gleam disappeared and all was black again. A hundred yards further brought them into a wider clearing; the uncertain lightning showing what might be fields, but fenceless and bare. A single tall chimney pointed to heaven, like an abandoned lighthouse; and round it lay what might be *débris* of a burned farm-house. Still beyond, the next flash showed the wearied men a low, rough log-house, flanked by a shed-stable, probable outbuildings of the missing mansion. But not one gleam of light showed anywhere; and the dead stillness, as the column halted, was broken only by the rattle and tramp of their own movement. No voice of man or of beast welcomed the wayfarers to hoped-for rest.

"Let me reconnoiter, Cap.," Latham volunteered. "There may be sleepers in the cabin."

"Take the sergeant and two men," ordered the more cautious senior. "There may be bushwhackers in the shed, too. Squad, 'tention! Unslung carbines! Lieutenant Latham, you and your men lie down, if fired on! Men, if there is any shooting from the houses, fire at the flash! Now, sir, forward and reconnoiter!"

As the lightning showed, Latham took his bearings, dismounted and advanced on foot, followed by two dismounted troopers. All was still and black as they reached the log house, and the rain descended now in almost blinding sheets. To his cheery hail the officer received no response, and he rapped sharply on the door with the butt of his pistol. Still no answer came; and, growing impatient, he fumbled for the latch, only to find that its yielding showed the door barred within. Again he rapped; this time louder and somewhat angrily, as he called:

"Open the door! Open, I say! in the name of the Confederate States!"

No sound came from the house; and the now irate cavalryman drew back to kick against the door, when there came the creak of rusty iron to his ear from the side of the cabin. Turning quickly at the sound, Latham caught the faint gleam of a light, as though a shutter had opened. If so, it had been as quickly closed, for the supposed glimmer had disappeared, and all was still.

"Force the door, men!" he ordered; and the not unwilling troopers threw heavy shoulders against

the planks, that shook but did not yield. But the menace brought voice to the inmate at last; for a deep, resonant call came from within:

“Hold on, thar! Who be ye, raidin’ a home at this yower?”

“Friends!” replied Latham. “Open and let us in!”

CHAPTER II.

A LATTER DAY TORY.

THE gay lieutenant's laughing philosophy had struck the truth. It was no ghost that had startled their horses on the mountain side, but a real woman, of as much flesh and blood as mountain motherhood, wearing anxiety and scant fare had left to her share. Tall, gaunt, and rawboned, she seemed wholly careless of the storm, although her rain-soaked clothing of coarsest homespun clung to the thin limbs, and a steady rill poured from the faded shawl drawn over her head, its sole protection from the storm.

But, crouched close against the huge trunk of a spreading chestnut-oak, the woman recked little of the warring elements without; for those within were in fierce struggle, judged from their flitting across her face, as it showed in the transient gleams of lightning. It was a strong face; and had perhaps been a pretty one, too; but the fingers of Time and of Care had passed their acid sponges over it long ago; and now its parchment—like that of the palimpsest—showed only deep lines, etched by the mordant of suffering, that furrowed and hardened it into premature age. But, beneath the unkempt yellow hair and the sparse, whitish eyebrows, a pair of green-blue

eyes literally blazed out above the sunken cheeks and the pinched lips, giving strong, if weird, character to the face.

And those eyes never left the column of cavalry as it toiled along the rough roadway; the woman moving in advance of it, cautious, noiseless, tenacious as a Fate. But that she was wholly human, and no Will-o'-th'-Wisp leading them to destruction, the vivid play of emotions over her face plainly showed. Cunning and fear, hate and eager curiosity were there, all dominated by yearning anxiety. When the column had halted, just before the storm, this woman's eyes had burned down on them in fierce scrutiny from the vantage of a higher ledge of rock.

"Tha's Johnnies, sho'ly," she muttered to herself. "Ef tha's not ther same lot, et's sum critter cump'ny a-huntin' my man! The're doan be no differ—a-huntin' Hank all th' same!"

When the line took up its march again, this strange spy lay in hiding until its advance had almost reached her covert; then gliding a little beyond it, alert, noiseless and sure of foot, but wholly heedless of darkness and of storm.

At the halt, the click of pistols told the woman that the lightning had betrayed her; and, drawing the drenched shawl closer about her head, she plunged deeper into the thicket, unmindful of the shots likely to follow her. Cutting off the detour, she raced through the gloom of woods; and was running across the wagon track into the clearing beyond when

Latham caught the second glimpse of his "Mountain Venus," and apostrophized her in Schiller's words.

As she sped on, cunning and experience alike told the woman that the troopers must stick to the unknown roadway, and await the flashes, while she crossed the disused field and reached the house. Opening the door scarce wide enough to admit her slim form, she slammed and bolted it; placed her back against it and, swishing her drenched shawl to the floor, panted out:

"Tha's a-cummin', paw! I spied th' crittercump'-ny! Et's in th' road now—a-cummin' fur Hank!"

A glowing bed of coals on the rude hearth cast weird shadows about the rough room, both of its sashless windows being closed with heavy shutters. Two rough bunks and a long plank dresser occupied the sides of the apartment, its furniture completed by a heap of brush fire-wood, and sawed-off logs to replace missing chairs. From one of these the sole occupant rose to face the woman; and, standing in the red light of the coals, he had proved fit model for Doré, in his stronger mood.

Tall, rawboned and angular, the figure still showed signs of uncommon strength, strongly emphasized by the lean, muscular arms, bare to the elbow, and the great brown, knotted hands that terminated them. As he rose erect, the man towered far above the usual height even of mountaineers, spite of a stoop of shoulders that sent forward, in eager-seeming quest, the large square topped and grizzled head. The coarse blue jeans shirt, open at the neck, showed the brawny and hirsute chest; while the long, lithe

legs were firm set and strong, as he stood. The man's face would have been a marked one in any congregation of types. The broad, retreating forehead, with long, grizzled locks on either side, was beetled with shaggy, gray eyebrows. Beneath them, out of the shadows of a broad based, aquiline nose, gleamed a pair of very deep-set eyes, greenish hued, as were the woman's, but with a red glare in them which added a singular power to his glance. Very long and thin, but square and firm set, jaws terminated in ears of unusual size, bristling with hair coarse as that of the wild boar; but the whole face was beardless, showing the close, straight set of lips that might be gentle or cruel, as either mood swayed the man.

Promptly and firmly as he rose to his feet, there was yet a grave deliberation about the old man,—for he must have well passed sixty years,—and there was measured sonorousness in the hard but deep voice that answered the woman's panting cry:

"Yer be n't errin', be yer, gell?" The mountaineer of that region ever shows an indirectness in placing a negatived query, even before a statement of fact; a result of habit, doubtless, in this case, rather than of character. "Yer hain't ben takin' critters fur soljers, hez yer?"

"Sho' I hain't, paw! Th' critter cump'ny's en th' path now; twenty on 'em, an' two cap'ns!"

"Whar's Hank?" The old man's eyes glowed; and his bony hand instinctively clutched the long hunting rifle, leaning against the wall.

"I dunno, paw! Hain't seen my man fur two whole day. He war to be yer tur night; but reck'n

he's layin' in th' ole hidin' now. That ben't no use!" She touched the rifle as she spoke. "Tha's too many; twenty with guns an' choppin' knives—all arter Hank! He mus' be warnt."

An uglier gleam came from the old man's eyes, as the hard fingers shut closer round the rifle barrel. But he only lifted his right hand above his head, in menacing imprecation, as he growled:

"Ther Lord's curse on 'em all—root an' branch! Ther bloody, man-huntin' devils!" Then, rapidly yet deliberately, he added: "Yes; he must be warnt! Yer ben't skeert, gell, be yer? Then speed an' warn yer man! No; not by thar," he cautioned, as the woman gathered her drenched shawl and touched the wooden door-bolt. "Git by hither!"

The soft splash of hoofs upon wet ground, and the low murmur of voices without, reached his ear as he spoke, telling both there was short time for escape, as the man opened the creaking shutter cautiously and only far enough for the frail body of the woman to slip out into the storm once more. But, even as Latham's quick eye detected the doubtful gleam, all was dark again; and the woman was speeding through the rain straight into the black woods.

A moment later came the summons at his door; the old man standing grim and defiant facing it, but silent to gain her time. Once more he raised his clinched hand on high; and once more the evil gleam deepened in his eyes, as his lips moved in wordless curse. Then, at the last rough summons, he spoke, strode to the door and threw it wide. The gleam of the fire, lighting the misty night into steam, went

out cheerily to the drenched men; the party advancing rapidly, carbine in hand.

"Halt!" rang Shelby's voice. "Stranger, we need shelter for the night. Can we get it?"

The motionless man in the doorway measured the group cautiously but deliberately, his back to the fire and his face unseen. Then he replied slowly:

"Course yer kin; an' thet 'thout help 'long o' me. Yer'll tek wot yer need, axin' er t'uther."

"Are you alone here?" the captain asked.

"I war 'tell yer 'vaded my place," was the grim reply of the unwilling host. "Them sheds thar be empty. I hain't got no victual, but thar's wood beyant."

With prompt decision Shelby dismounted; and the sergeant, with scant ceremony, brushed by the head of the horse and seized a blazing stick from the hearth. Soon, with that alacrity to utilize the worst circumstances common to the trooper in blue or in gray, each man had his horse under shelter of the not clean shed, had rubbed him with a wisp of the scattered straw, and was trying to dry himself at one of the cheerful fires dotting the front. Some, too weary to care for wet, had stretched beside their beasts, saddle pillowed, and already slept the sleep of the good digestion—albeit with slack exercise for it.

"Send out one picket each way, sergeant; and keep one post stable-guard," the captain ordered, adding: "This is a precious night for bushwhackers; and we can't spare one man—or horse!"

With this caution, he and Latham turned into the house, each instinctively feeling if his pistol was loose.

in holster. Unceremoniously the two officers passed to the fire, placing their backs so near it that a steamy mist rose from their soaked clothing; but their ungracious host still stood in the doorway, facing them, silent and grim.

"Who are you, my man?" Shelby queried, bluntly.

"I ben't yer man, be I?" was the deliberate response. "I be a free cit'zen ov Alabama state, soljer, an' thet's a mighty differ."

"Well, then, what are you besides?"

"I be John Holden; an' I hev farm'd 'roun yere nigh onto forty year, afore this cursid war riz ter distroy ther lan'! May the Lord's blight fall on 'em ez made it!"

Shelby made no reply, only slipping a greasy notebook from an inner pocket and scanning a page by the firelight; but Latham turned sharply on the rebellious speaker:

"You don't speak very loyally for an Alabamian!"

Gravely, but with an ugly glint in his eyes, the old man measured the youth from head to heel; then answered very slowly and bitterly:

"I doan' speak loil, doan' I? I war loil ter th' guv'ment afore yer war born, young soljer; an' I swar I'm too ole ter larn new tricks! Curse ther war!" he went on, with deeper voice and raised right hand. "Curse ther spillin' ov blood ter mek breth'rin, the starvin' ov winmin ter mek peace an' good will! Curse o' th' Lord on ther skulkin' hunters ov po' devils, lyin' out starvin' on ther mounting!"

"You talk like a traitor, old man!" Shelby said.

"Yer talk like a nigger-trader, young soljer," Holden retorted, in the same deliberate voice; but the veins swelled out on the hard hand that gripped his gun and his eyes literally blazed. "John Holden talks no differ ez he talked in ther convenshun, wen he stud fur right, an' light, an' God's jestice, 'gin ther whole sesesh! Tha 'lowed then tha'd hang him fur th' truth; but he ain't hanged yit, air he? John Holden talks under his own roof ez he'll talk at th' bar o' jedgment; an' he be n't owin' no loilty to sech ez ye be!"

"Well, you're safe from us, so long as you only talk," Shelby rejoined, quietly. "We are soldiers, not lawyers; and we are your guests to-night, besides."

"An' ov yer own axin', too," was the uncompromising retort.

"All the same, we hope to sample your salt," Latham put in gaily, "for we're devilish hungry after our bath. But, all the same, you'll find a less disloyal tongue more safe."

"I'm not a-huntin' ov safety 'long o' ye," the old man answered doggedly. "I tell yer agin, this man-huntin' is dirty bizness fer eny soljer; an' a dirty night th' Lord hev sent ye fur it! John Holden war agin ther war from fust! He'll live an' die agin it! He war reck'n'd good 'nuff an' loil enuff ter send to ther convenshun, an' he stud agin 'em all. But th' Lord's curse was on 'em; an' they row'd an' fit an' 'low'd fur standin' out 'gin ther guv'ment; an' none ov 'em knowed why, 'cep'n' along ov th' niggers! An'

in the mountings, we hain't own'd no niggers, hez we? An' we never 'spects ter. John Holden tole 'em th' Lord's truth then; an' he hain't larnt ter talk no differ yit! Who ge'en Jeff Davis ther rite ter order me an' my flesh to fight inter th' war? Who ge'en ye ther rite ter 'vade roun' yere, a-skeerin' lone wimmin, an' a-huntin' huming game? Warn't et enuff ter strip th' lan' o' men an' crops an' critters? Fur now an' fur doomsday, I say, curse ther war! Curse Jeff Davis an' his hull crew, a-harryin' po' devils in ther mountings!"

"Shut your treasonous mouth!" Latham began, striding one step toward the staunch old bigot. But Shelby restrained him with the quiet words:

"Steady, Latham. We have no orders to try traitors. Besides, we are under his roof."

"An' ther do's open yit, ef yer doan' keer ter stay, young soljer!" Holden added, grimly.

"Thanks; but I'll stay," Latham replied, with returning good humor. "Better keep a closer tongue, though. You might say what would force the captain to carry you along; and, frankly, I do not think you would be a congenial messmate."

"He is right, Holden," Shelby said, gravely. "We are not sent here to talk politics; but I cannot listen to rank treason, even when born of overzeal for your"—he paused a moment, then added slowly—"your friends, out in hiding such a night as this!"

The mountaineer made no reply in words, but the evil red gleam deepened in his eyes at the last words, and his lower jaw set harder against its fellow. He still stood rigid in the open doorway; heedless of the

driving rain and of the lurid flashes that lit his figure into uncanny seeming of a statued Vengeance.

"With your permission, mine host," Latham cried, lightly, as he threw on dry brush, and both troopers held their wet boots to the blaze. "I'd like to draw mine off, for the first time in thirty-six hours; but, in such weather and in these parts, I have learned that it is not a man's hat but his boots which fit too tight in the morning. By the way,"—he turned cheerily to the motionless figure,—“I'd be glad to loosen my belt, too, if you can possibly fill that aching void it partly coerces. Can you not give us a bite and some coffee? We'll pay you well for it, old man.”

The mountaineer made no reply for a moment. Over his face the play of flitting emotions told of inward struggle; then the features settled into quiet with the green-red eyes glinting with a cunning that dominated hate. He leaned his rifle against the wall, closed the door and strode to the fire ere he answered:

"John Holden hain't a-sellin' grub ter soljers, boy! But it hain't en him ter turn a dog, er a soljer, frum his do', wet an' hungry! Keep yer Cornfed'rit rag. Yer be free ter share wot yer likes hev lef' fur us ter starve on. Ef ye do be agin us, ye shell eat!"

He raked some glowing coals out on the hearth, with his huge, red brogan; turned to the dresser and produced platters with corn pone and salted meat; and placed a blackened coffee-pot upon the coals. Scant ceremony was used by the hungry cavalymen; and, in a moment, altercation was replaced by the far more congenial working of three pairs of jaws.

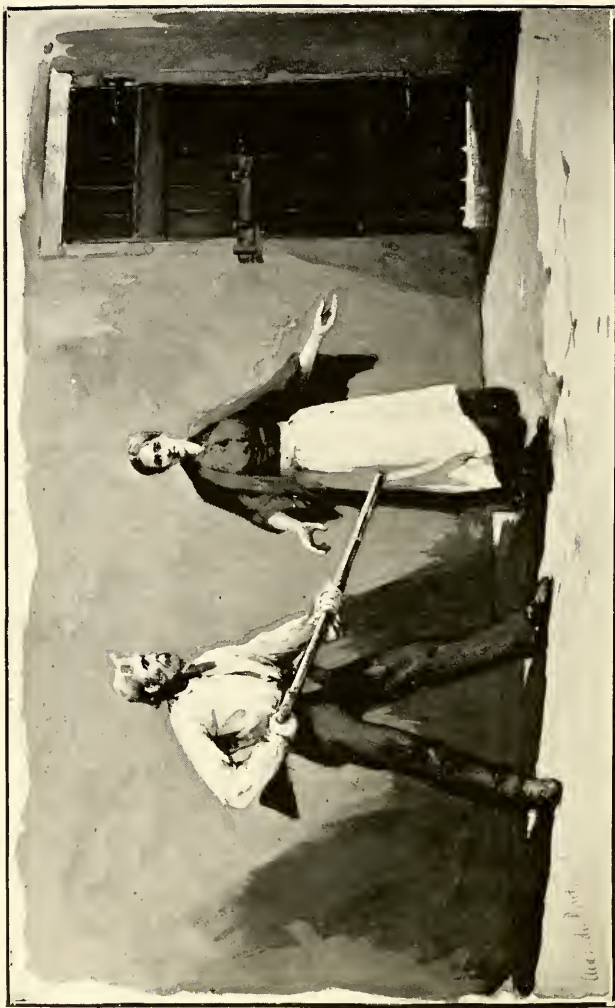
For Holden, too, sat on a sawed stump and ate with his unbidden guests. And, though he ate as if food had not passed his lips that day, the furtive gleam of his eyes rested ceaselessly on one or the other of the men, cunning blending with keen calculation, in the gaze.

Parched corn "coffee" was not nectar. Neither could saltless corn pone and fat, rancid bacon replace ambrosia. But never did festive gods on high Olympus quaff or masticate with more eagerness and earnestness, however higher may have soared appreciation. But at last, even soldier appetite was appeased; and it was the younger officer that unslung his canteen, covered with blue cloth, and offered it to his host.

"Mr. Holden, we may not agree on the letter of doctrine," he said saucily, "but we may join in the spirit! This canteen should not offend you, for I—*hem!*—borrowed it from a gentleman of your way of thinking a short while back. There is still enough in it for two; will you join me?" He drew the stopper, wiping the nozzle with his sleeve, as he proffered the vessel to the old man.

"Nun ov thet fur me, young man," Holden replied, gravely; and his voice softened strangely as he added: "I hain't never techt et sence my 'ooman died. I ge'en her th' promis' as she war a-goin', an' hev kep' ther wurd!"

"Well, you can join me," Shelby put in, gazing curiously at Holden. He drew a black briar pipe and an India rubber bag from his damp pocket, as he



"THAT BENT NO USE!"—Page 26.

added: "This is genuine Lynchburg, and drives away the blue devils."

"I hain't never pestered by th' devil," Holden answered, gravely, "but I doan' puff nuthin', nuther. Wen John Holden did git drunk, it were always on rale mounting lick. Sence he quit, he ain't never keared ter pisin' himse'f on smoke. Light yer owns; none on it fur me," and he turned quietly to the dresser, with the now nearly emptied platters.

"He seems a regular old Arab as to his salt," Latham whispered to his senior, "but more of a Wahabee about rum and tobacco. He would shoot either of us on the mountain side as a pleasant episode; but considers a sip and a cloud a crime! I doubt if Mr. Holden has really read Monckton Milnes; but he *is* a Wahabee."

Both officers filled their pipes and puffed in silence a while, Holden sitting grim and motionless between the pair. Ever and again, as a horse nickered without, his head bent further forward, as tho' in eager listening; and once, at the changed sentry's challenge, he started to rise, in dread lest they had indeed caught his boy. But, at last, Latham's pipe dropped from his lips, as he dozed contentedly; and Shelby knocked the ashes from his briar root, as he rose and called cheerily:

"Taps! Wake up, Bev.! It's time to go to bed."

Holden pointed silently to the bunks, without rising from his seat; and both officers spreading their still damp coats over the logs, laid their waterproofs and blankets on the hard board and prepared for

soldier sleep. At his bunk, Shelby faced suddenly, asking Holden:

"Where is your son?"

Accustomed as he was to sudden surprises in his mountain life, even the iron nerves of John Holden nearly betrayed him. It was only for one instant that he gave a slight start, and that his lips moved without sound, in reply. The next, the face grew stolid as before; but the eyes, that shone with evil gleam, were averted from Shelby's scrutiny, as he answered, slowly:

"I 'low he's with his reege'm'nt. Hank war a soljer, 'long o' you'uns, 'gin his paw's will."

"When did you see him last," Shelby again queried.

The lie, that personal peril had never wrung from the fanatical mountaineer, came glib and swift to the father's fear; and the voice was still unshaken and slow that replied:

"Not sence he rid away ter jine ther critter cump'ny, a year cum nex' munth."

"Was he married?" The querist was persistent.

One lurid gleam shot from the old man's eyes into the calm soldier's. Then they fell again; and the voice was lower that answered:

"Yes; he war marrit!"

"Had he children?"

"He hed. One gell an' one peart boy. Ther kid war named fur his gren'paw, John Holden." The voice softened strangely and shook a trifle now, as it added: "An' we berrit him jès five week gone!"

"And his father never saw him?"

No answer had been needed, more than the deadly hate that glinted in the eyes Holden turned upon his questioner, as the black nails dug into his clinched hands. But the soldier's eyes—under strain of distasteful duty—were turned away; and a supreme effort once more controlled the old man, so that he lied loyally:

“Naw; his daddy never seen 'im!”

“That was sad, indeed,” the captain answered. “Then there must be some error in this?” He fixed his eyes full upon the mountaineer's, again drew the memorandum book from his pocket, and, never looking at it, read from memory: “‘Hank Holden, private troop B,—th Alabama Cavalry; six feet tall; stoops; sandy hair; pock-marked. Deserted June 6, 1863;’ last seen near his home July 2, 1863’.—This cannot be your son?”

For as long as one might count fifty, the two men stood, looking in each other's eyes; those of the officer steady and calm, while the mountaineer's deepened until their red gleam was fierce and wolfish. Then John Holden rose from his seat, erect, defiant; and, raising his right hand high above his head, he spoke deliberately, but fiercely and with desperate menace in his tone:

“Man, yer be tryin' ter trap me! John Holden be known these parts roun'. He hain't never tole a lie afore this cursid war! He hain't a-lyin' now, wen he tells yer this; he hain't yit turned back ter no enemy, er never went back on er frien'! He hain't agoin' ter lie agin, 'bout his boy! Hank Holden—my boy—all yer've leff' me now! Hank *is* a-lyin' out on ther

mounting ter night; a-hidin' frum th' hunters his paw's a-keepin' dry an' warm! I hain't afeard ter tell ye; he's a-hidin thar, whar yer'll not fin' him, an' I'll help him, ef God jedges me! Ketch Hank, ef yer kin! Thet's wot Jeff Davis pays yer fur! Pays yer ter keep th' conscrip' frum his starvin' wife—from his dyin' chile! Ketch Hank Holden, ef yer kin; but heer me now: ef yer harm one har of his head—ef yer shoot my boy! then I swar God's yoath!"—his form seemed to dilate and tower taller in the flickering light, and the roof pole rang under his vibrant voice—"I swar thet I'll foller ye boath ter th' end o' th' yearth, but wot I'll do ter ye wot ye hev done ter my boy! As sure as thar's a God up thar, or a devil in hell I'll do jest that!"

The old man's voice—strident, yet solemn as a curse—was still. Dead silence fell upon the trio; and the soldiers felt a thrill pass through them, from the magnetic will of the resolute fanatic.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON.

WITHOUT, the rain still pattered on the leaves, but with lighter fall; the growl of the thunder rolled sullen but more distant, and the wild wail of the storm wind fell into a dull moan.

Through the sounds of warring nature, suddenly cut clear and sharp the ring of a distant shot. With one impulse, the three men turned, listening; but, before either could move, a second report rang out, clearer and more near. Holden's lips moved, but no word came from them, as he rushed to the door and threw it wide. The others followed, but recoiled at the threshold, as a vivid, blue flash of lightning almost blinded them. Next instant, all three were standing eagerly, bareheaded in the storm.

"Carbine firing," Latham said, peering under his hand into the gloomy beyond.

"The last shot, yes," Shelby answered. "The first shot was a rifle."

As the head of Holden towered behind them, his thin lips formed the wordless prayer: "God help my boy!"

The sergeant ran up soon, to report, hand to cap:

"A skulker about the north picket post, sir. Challenged, he fired at us; and our man answered."

"Was the picket hit, sergeant?"

"No, sir; but the bullet cut his cape. The bushwhacker fired at his flash."

"And got away, as usual," Latham added.

"Yes, sir. It's hard shooting in a night like this, sir," the sergeant replied, apologetically.

"An' he warn't born on ther mounting, ter be killed by hired hunters! Ther Lord'll guard him on his own groun'!"

Holden's voice was sonorous with conviction but full of contemptuous hate; and the captain turned quick upon him:

"So you planned this!"

"Et ben't likely, be it?" was the calm rejoinder. "You'uns warn't 'vited yere, war ye? An' sence yer've cum, I hain't leff ye, hev I? But I do jedge as ther man wot yer hunters driv off were mere comin' ter his own right, under his paw's roof!"

"Your son!" Latham's tone showed his amaze at the man's cool audacity.

"Like'r'n no, I jedge. En he hed er right ter cum. He is in ther han's ov ther Lord, boy! His time hev got ter cum, but it hain't cum yit, yer see. Untel et shell, yer bullets—an' ther bullets ov ther hull Bragg army—hain't no pow'r ter harm Hank. He's en ther Lord's hands! Let him be!"

With these words the mountaineer raised his bared head solemnly to the black vault above, standing one moment still as though carved in stone. The next, he turned deliberately, moved back to the fire;

and, seating himself upon a log, seemed wrapped in thought and wholly forgetful of his unbidden guests.

"He's mad as a March hare!" Latham whispered to his senior, at the door. "Of course, though, he is lying, to throw us off the track."

"Of course not," the captain answered. "It does not surprise me that the deserter was trying to meet his 'paw'; and you know we were not expected here."

"I suppose you are right," the junior responded. "We must do some close beating of the bush about here, to-morrow."

"We must, indeed. Sergeant, have the men ready to move at first dawn. Double your picket, and keep your eyes open."

With these words the officers re-entered the cabin, closed the door and cast meaning glances upon the motionless figure of the man at the fire. But he took no note of their entry by word or glance, staring absently into the coals with dreamy, absent gaze. The soldiers exchanged glances, seemed satisfied that their outside guard was sufficient and stretched out on their blankets. Only Latham spoke, in a low whisper, as he pulled his pistol butt well toward his hand:

"I was right; he's mad as a March hare!"

Time passed heavily over the cabin, the night watch of the sitter-up intruded upon by no sound save the soft patter of rain, occasional distant thunder, and the deep, regular breathing of the sleeping officers. The fire gradually died out, first into a mass of glowing coals, then into the dull gray ash of burnt brush. And then, the old man turned his head

cautiously, and as in query, toward the sleepers. But he only shook it slowly, in negative to his own thought; remaining motionless upon his stump. At last he turned again—the cabin now perfectly dark—and listened intently. Then slowly, so slowly that he scarce seemed to move at all, Holden left his seat, falling upon hands and knees with the softness of a cat. Gradually he moved—almost crawling flat upon his face—to the door, pausing to listen at every yard, and finally opening the latch without a sound. Then he lay prone upon the sill; for the moon gave a sickly gleam, that was scarcely light, as it peered for a moment from behind the clouds. But it was only for a moment. Then a heavy, dull cloud swept across her face; and when the Goddess of Night next peered down upon the doorway, it was empty and the man was gone.

Where? Out through darkness, loneliness and storm to find his boy, and warn him of the dangers closing round about him. Crouched in the dense shadows of the cabin, he crept away from stations of the pickets, crossed the open space like a spirit, and gained the deep shadowing woods, beyond the chance of sound traveling upon the damp air. Then he straightened to his full height; fell into the long, swinging stride of the mountaineer, and rapidly ascended the steepest side of the mountain, pathless but almost bare of growth, save scrub and mountain laurel. Once he stopped upon a ledge, overlooking the fires at his own cabin, now far below him, bared his head and lifted his right hand to the starless vault above. His lips moved rapidly, but no

word left them to shock the attent ear of Night, whether his action was a menace or a vow.

Then, plunging deeper into the brush, and aided by branch and overhanging stone, he clambered up what might have been a cattle track. But cattle were as scarce as Confederates in the mountains of North Alabama in 1863, and Holden's way was as arduous as it was steep. At last, he reached a narrow spur of stone, bare and projecting over the precipitous descent to the cove below. Lying flat upon it, he gave a peculiar call, close imitation of the mountain owl. Pausing a moment, he repeated it, and then a third time gave the signal.

Not until then did answer come from beneath the rock; but soon a head was lifted cautiously over the ledge, in the now fitful moon gleams; the head was followed by body and legs, laboriously drawn up, and father and son clasped hands in a horny, but meaningful, grip. The latter, a vigorous man just past his early manhood, seemed to tally with Shelby's description.

"Well, paw," he said, quietly, "tha's kind o' surprised me, wen I cum ter nite."

"Wy will yer be so ventursom', Hank?" the old man queried, softly. "Yer mite a-knowed by ther fires—"

"I hain't 'spectin' cav'ry yere, em I, paw? I hain't seed th' fire 'fore the picket shet."

"Lucky fur thim as miss'd yer, Hank! Yer paw hev rigesteered a yoath, son! Ef 'e'd a shot yer, he'd a had ther blood 'afore dawnin', sho' ez God sets

thar! But yer shed 'a ben warnt. Lize 'lowd she'd tell yer on 'em."

"'Spect she cum ter th' hidin' wile I war on th' road ter hum, paw. Po' ole gell! She doan' hev much peace 'long 'o me! Paw, I'm a-goin' back!"

The old man dropped the hand he had held till now and stepped back, staring in amaze. Then he spoke, in a whisper that was almost a hiss:

"Back! Back ter them as hunts yer fur blood? Back ter Bragg's army, whar yer'll swing like er cattle thief? Yer ben't lune, Hank, be yer?"

"Naw, I ben't, paw! But I do be sick an' worrit pas' bearin', arter all thes' weeks. I hain't a cat, er skunk, paw; an' I do be worrit' o' ther huntin' me lek sich! Naw! Doan' preach, paw! I knows wot yer'd say; but I tell yer, et 'ud be long better fur Lize! Po' gell! she's a-wearin' out body an' soul, watchin' fur me; an' ther mounting's plum full o' cav'ry now, 'long er Bragg an' Forres' bein' so clus. Th'll git me yit; an' I'll be shet sho!"

"An' ef yer be, John Holden have swar his yoath ter God, Hank! He'll hev blood fur yourn, sho' ez death!"

"Thet 'ud n't help me then, paw! Thet' udn't help Lize, nuther. 'Sides, thet ain't all. Hank ez yer own son, John Holden; an' he doan' skeer quick. So it hain't only that; but, 'layin all 'lone day an' nite, it hev cum ter me, paw. I hev *th' right* ter go back; I blongs ter Bragg's army, s'long as I jined free!"

"Free! Yer jined 'gin yer paw's will! not a-mindin' his rightjus word! B'long ter Bragg? B'long ter Jeff Davis? B'long ter them as fights ther guv'ment

o' this yere lan'? Hank Holden, yer do be lunc, sho's sun'll rise!"

"Tha's no en'mies o' mine, paw. I hev rid 'long o' th' boys; I hev fit by 'em, hot an' cole. I hev *th' right* ter go back, paw; an' I'm a-goin'!"

"An' leave yer 'ooman, Hank? Leave yer little gell ter starve?"

"Naw; jest help 'em, paw! I hain't a-helpin' now; only a-worritin' Lize. Ef I go back, ther's one mouth less ter feed; an' ther po' gell kin hev sum res', night by day, 'stead ov watchin' 'long ov me, an' starvin' ter feed—th' disarter!"

He spoke the word in bitter scorn; but he drew up to his full height and folded his long arms across his breast, with a rude dignity.

"Ez thar's a Lord above, yer shell *not* go, Hank Holden!" the older man cried, with raised hand.

"Ez ther's a Lord abuv, I'm a-goin' back, paw!" the younger responded firmly. "I tole yer ez I war yer son, paw; an' wen a man's min' ez sot, by thinkin' et all out under ther sky, 'lone an' by nite, 'taint no use ter preach. I be sot; an' I know I do hev ther rite ter go!"

"An' be mock tried, 'fore yer be shet, Hank?"

"Ef I do be shet; I'll resk that, paw! An' et 'ull be my own doin,' arter all. I hed n't orter jined, ef I low'd ter quit. Yer shud be 'shamed ov yer son, paw!—a cow'rd an' disarter!"

"Yer cum arter axin' an' prayin', Hank! Yer cum ter yer starvin' wife, ter yer dyin' boy! Th' Lord never hev give Jeff Davis pow'r ter stop flesh an' blood frum feelin', boy! I say yer shell *not* go back!"

"But I *shell* go, paw! My min' is sot!"

"An' leave yer 'ooman?"

"She's better off 'thout me!" the deserter answered; but his voice trembled and grew very gentle as he went on: "Po' Lize! She'll git mo' sleep—mo' grub 'thout her man ter watch fur! An' th' po' dead Johnnie! Wot good war my comin', anyway? It hain't saved him! Don't tell my 'ooman, paw. She'd only fret an' pray an' cry. But, sho' ez sun do rise, I'm a-goin' ter see her one mo' time. I'm a-goin' ter see little Johnnie's grave one mo' time, and then—" again his voice rang resolute, and he stood erect, defiant—"then, paw, I'm a-goin back!"

The pale moon looked down through fleecy veil of clouds upon the strange pair, so strangely wrangling in the solitude of night. For a full minute the men stood motionless, looking into each other's eyes. The soft light seemed to smile on the rough, resolute features of the son; but the shadows deepened over the father's face, as the thin lips set in harder line and the red gleam blazed from his eyes. Suddenly he raised his right hand, in habitual menace; speaking slowly and deliberately, but in a hard dry tone:

"Hank Holden, yer war my son! Yer hev ben yer paw's hope—all that's leff him, now. Wen yer jined 'gin his will, yer near bruck his heart. Now, arter all yer hev stud, arter all ther grief ther cursid war hev cause, arter yer hev seen yer dead boy an' yer starvin' wife—now, ef yer *do* go back—" the long, bony hand above his head trembled as the man paused; he gulped down something that stopped his speech, and

went on more rapidly: "Then may th' Lord sen' his—"

"Stop! Doan' yer say et! Paw, I say—*stop!*" The young man's voice rang out, clear and commandful, cutting the curse that trembled on his father's lips; and, as he spoke, his strong right arm went out, his hand grasped the raised one of his sire, bringing it down with sudden twist and holding it firmly in the cover of his two.

"Doan' yer say et, paw! Wen Hank Holden hev disgrace his paw, et'ull be time 'nuff ter cuss him! Now, he hev got ther rite ter go; paw, let 'im go en peace!"

The distant rumbling thunder, echoing up the cove beneath them, sounded as in salute. The moon cleared her face of cloud-veil and smiled softly down; and at the instant, clear and sharp across the distance, rang the reveillé from the bugle of the cavalry.

The old mountaineer's great head bowed further forward; his arms relaxed, but his trembling lips formed no word, as his horny hand grasped his boy's. And that boy, hearing the bugle call, drew himself to full stature, standing at attention, as his free hand went to his forehead, at salute.

CHAPTER IV.

HUNTING THE BIG GAME.

DAY on the mountain broke, after the storm, in all its fresh grandeur, and with a calm that hinted nothing of war and her attendant trials. The thunder-cleansed atmosphere was redolent of shrub-scents and mountain laurel, as the first streaks of dawn appeared, seemingly in their suddenness as in answer to the reveillé of Shelby's bugle.

Quickly the men had saddled; had munched the last remaining crumbs of "tack" in their lean haversacks; and had tightened a hole each, the girths of their unfed horses. The trooper who was happy possessor of a fragment of black "niggerhead," was as enviable and as quickly surrounded as is a new millionaire "on change."

Shelby showed no surprise at the open door and absence of the mountaineer, when he opened his eyes promptly at bugle call. But Latham, glancing at the long rifle leaning against the wall, grumbled, as he buckled his belt and stamped the stiffness out of his dried boots:

"The pestilent old traitor! Why isn't he here to give us some coffee? Um! Guess he's gone to warn that precious skulker we shot at last night."

"Natural enough," Shelby responded. "You'd do the same, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know, Cap. 'You'd scarce expect one of my age, to speak in public' of the feelings of a father. But I *would* like a drop of coffee—though it was as bitter as the old devil's own language! I'll try it cold, anyway," and the reckless youngster dived under the dresser and found the coffee pot, helping himself to a sip that twisted his face comically.

"None for me, after last night," Shelby said. "I'll stick to the canteen, rather." He took a gulp of rum; stuffed some cornbread in his mouth and left the cabin. When the lieutenant joined him at the head of the ready column, there was a new odor added to the morning air scents; and the sub was twisting his mustache fiercely.

"Ah! Bev., you double-teamed on the commanding officer," Shelby cried.

"Guilty; mercy of the court," the junior laughed. "Extenuation found in any old copy-book: 'Examples move when coffee fails!'"

The column, quickly mounted, was soon on the march over singularly dry paths, for Nature's engineering had proved its worth. Her unapproached sewerage of shed and gully, had run surplus water off the abrupt descents, and the only moisture was that on leaf and stunted grass. As they rounded a high, precipitous crag and faced the east, the officers drew rein; and Shelby, pointing over the valley, cried:

· "Look! What a gorgeous sunrise!"

·

"Grand! Perfect!" Latham gushed. "The poet must have seen a mountain morning, when he wrote:

'Forth from the curtain of clouds, from the tent of
purple and scarlet,
Issued the Sun, the great High Priest, in garments
resplendent;
Holiness unto the Lord! in letters of light on his
forehead;
Round the hem of his robe, the golden bells and
pomegranates!'

And, see, Cap., how prettily that picturesque little home, way down in the valley, grows under the light."

He pointed almost straight below, to where the red, open space of a small farm-plat cut the gray-greens of the mountain side, at the head of a small cove or valley; near it a little stream winding like a silver snake between the brush-grown banks.

"Picturesque enough," the older soldier answered, as he touched his horse with the spur; "but when you get near it—as we will, later in the day—you'll find that dirt and squalor have borrowed largely from distance for their enchantment."

"Some poor devil conscript's home, perhaps," Latham replied. "I always feel sorry for these poor women and children, left helpless by the drain of men; but I never realized what dirt and starvation meant, Cap., until I came on this mountain service. Hanged if I like it, either!"

"I should n't select it, myself," Shelby answered. "I never find man-hunting pleasant; and it is least so of all in this section, where almost all the people

are half-starved, and when half of them are unfriendly, if not open enemies."

"It is not Virginia," Latham said, ruefully. "Well, I presume we may possibly strike a farm-house somewhere, with a larder in it for a breakfast."

"And a girl?" the captain queried, with a laugh.

"With freckles, red hair, dirty sunbonnet and a pug nose?" the junior responded. "No, thank you! That last one killed my aspirations for mountain flirtation, 'for three years or the war.'"

"There are some clever and respectable families still left in the hill country," Shelby replied. "But here is a level stretch. A trot may sharpen your appetite both for breakfast and the girl."

He gave the order, and the column moved briskly forward, in direction opposite that taken the night before. The certain presence of deserters, and the audacious attack of Hank Holden the previous night determined the commander to make a wide detour before again striking for the Fort Payne road.

Meanwhile, the picturesque home that Latham had noticed was showing anything but comfort and peace to its two occupants. It was really only one of the many small clearings, that dotted the sides of Sand Mountain in those trying war days, and it showed the havoc that war's drain on men and means made, even with such humble homes. The scanty corn patch showed evidence of scantiest cultivation, with rude implements; the trailing squash and melon vines were partly trodden down; the absent fence left rare reminders of its pristine snaked rails; and only the light smoke of brush curled from

the chimney of the rude, low thatched log cabin, with its two rooms and wide passage-way between, used as kitchen, sitting room and wash house, as need prompted. A board shoved between the logs sufficed for shelf-room in such days of empty larder; and a sickly vine, trailing feebly against the post, was sole evidence that any thought of the inmates went beyond the most pressing and sordid needs of life.

Just skirting the clearing was a dense thicket of laurel and scrub oak; and through this flowed a deep and narrow stream, with great shadowed holes where mountain trout leaped in audacity of certain peace. For, while "ther crick" was laundry, lavatory and well for the inmates of the cabin, all in one, the inhabitants of Sand Mountain in 1863 had little time to think of fishing. For the most part, they were divided into hunters and hunted; and "the big game" was indeed plentiful.

Early as it was when the troopers spied the cabin, a rough table in the living room was spread for such breakfast as "the home" offered—hard corn bread, fat bacon and potato coffee. On the bench by it sat the tall, pale woman of the previous night's tramp; and an elfish, yellow-skinned child of some seven years, in frock that seemed her sole garment. It was torn and outgrown, too, though not as dirty as common with small mountain "gells." The little arms that went too far through the sleeves, and the long, kildee-like legs that were but half-hidden by skirt, told by their color that the girl was no stranger to "ager," and equally that she was never well-fed enough to resist it, from their thinness. Now the

child ate the rough fare ravenously, her hunger keener from lack of maternal care on the previous day, which had left her dinnerless and supperless as well.

But the mother ate nothing, sipping absently the thick coffee from her yellow mug. One hand supported her head, that looked more hay-like and wan in the clear light of day, and that showed, too, that the green-blue eyes were deep sunken and dim while at rest, with heavy black rings beneath them, invading the sunken, yellow cheeks. There was a furtive action frequent to those eyes, as if the woman were ever expectant of danger, or some sudden demand upon her nerves. None looking on her premature age and poverty-stamped aspect, had guessed that Lize Holden had been the belle and the beauty of Sand Mountain, when Hank had gained the enmity of men for himself, and the envy of all girls for her, by bringing his bride to this clearing!

Yet she was one only of the million results of the war, to this date equally trying to man and woman, yet only in light presage so far of the dire stress, suffering and agony to come to both!

"Cum, Sis, git 'long with yer feedin', can't yer?" the mother said, not ungently, as she waked out of a half-day-dream with a heavy sigh. "Yer'll hev ter skip 'cross ter yer grenpaw's; fur I missed yer dad at th' hidin' las' nite, an' I'm smearn worritid 'long o' thet critter cump'ny!"

The child, thus hurried, ceased the loud sips at her cracked, yellow coffee mug, and soon she rose in a little-old-womanly way and began arranging corn-bread and bacon strips in a homely sandwich.

"Dad mus' be smeart hungry, ef he miss'd yer, mammy. Like I'll meet 'im reound 'bout grenpaw's. Shen't I tote this yere grub?"

"Sho' yer shell, Sis," the mother answered with another sigh. "Et's jes th' lass' crum', but we'uns kin git mo' easier'n yer dad. Skip 'long, Sis, 'fore it gits hot b' sun."

The child gravely rolled up the food in an old checked apron, twitched from a peg a huge sunbonnet, and looked more a Brownie than ever, as its ample frill enveloped neck and shoulders; but she started up the steep and rocky path at a brisker pace than her slim legs and bare feet seemed to promise, and was soon lost to view beyond the clearing.

Leaning against the roof post, the mother stood long and quietly, looking after her under the hand that shaded her eyes from the sunlight, and when the hand fell, it carried the corner of her sleeve back quickly to dry the unaccustomed tears. Then, with a heavy sigh, the woman turned to a bench near by, on which stood a dingy washtub, and went wearily about her slim week's washing.

"The labor we delight in physics pain," Macbeth tells us; but Lize Holden's task seemed to carry with it little joy and less medicament to the spirit. Often the thin hands were still, and the now dull eyes stared vacantly across space, seeing nothing, for their vision seemed turned inward; and as the day grew brighter, the yellow hue of her face seemed deeper and more dull, taking that ashy ochre tint that has earned most Southern mountaineers the more or less baseless title of "clay-eaters." But



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"RUN, MY MAN! RUN FUR VER LIFE!"—Page 53.

Time never stops, however leaden shod seem his feet; and it was well approaching noon—and the small wash was not even well under way—when the rustle of bushes and the patter of small feet startled the woman from a deep day-dream. Turning, she saw Sis running down the path, breathless and swinging the sunbonnet as a signal, though not of peace.

“Mammy! Tha’s a-cummin’!” the elfish courier cried, while still at a distance. “Th’ critter cump’ny’s a-cummin’! I seen ’em ez I streck th’ path!”

“Did yer see yer dad, Sis?” the mother asked eagerly. “Did yer git ter grenpaw’s?”

“Naw! Them soljers cum theat a-way; an’ I cum back ter warn yer. Mammy!”—the midget stood erect and shook her little fist toward the unseen enemy,—“I wish I wuz er man! I’d tek er gun an’ bushwheck ther critter cump’ny wot’s a-chasin’ dad!”

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a man tore down the path at top speed. Coatless, hatless and nearly barefoot, he ran with the vigor of desperation, not turning to one of the many gaps in the broken fence, but taking the low rails before him in his stride. At sight of him, the woman gave a low scream; pressing both hands to her breast as she cried:

“Hank, ther soljers be clus by! Run, my man! Run fur yer life!”

Next moment his arms were about her, straining her close to his heart, as he panted:

“I know’t, Lize! I ben a-dodgin’ all day, tryin’ ter git home. But, wen I foun’ myself so clus’ ter ye,

I cuddn't help reskin' one mo' look at yer, gell! En' ther little 'un, too!" he added, with a little tremor in the voice, as one hard, brown hand rested gently on the red-straw of the head, which the girl hid in the scant skirts of her mother, to which she clung, sobbing.

"Run an' hide, Hank!" cried the terror-stricken wife, as the distant tramp of rapid-moving hoofs caught her ear. "For Gawd's sake! run, my man!" and she struggled to disengage herself from the strong arm that still held her close.

"I will run an' hide, jess' this wunst," the man answered, coolly. "I'll do't fur yer sake, Lize. I jes'll fool 'em wunst mo', an' then—arter one look at th' kid's grave—I'm dun o'hidin', wunst for all!"

With one kiss, almost fierce in its farewell, the hunted man released the trembling woman. Little time he had to spare, as he darted into the thickest brush, for the sound of hoofs advancing at brisk trot was close at hand, and the noise of shout and laughter were borne plainly to her ear. An instant more and the column passed down the pathway, trotting round the remnants of fence and drawing up before the cabin.

"Wot be you'uns a wantin' yere?" asked Lize Holden, as she stood on the porch, trembling with excitement, but showing no fear. "Yer ben't fitin' winnin en gells, be ye?"

"Don't be afraid, my good woman," Shelby answered, touching his cap. "We do not mean to harm you."

"Fear'd' o' wot?" she answered, with a dismal failure at a laugh. "Wy shud I be fear'd? We'uns hez seed critter cump'nys of'n nuff, ter git kind 'o us't ter 'em!"

"I'm glad of that," Shelby answered, scanning her closely.

"That's a pretty little girl of yours," Latham added, as if for something to say.

"Glad yer think so," the woman answered, grimly, but glad to gain time for her man. "Mos'ly ez yer hain't seed 'er face. Ef she wuz er boy, I 'spose yer'd ca'ay her 'long ter camp an' mek her fite fur you'uns?"

"Perhaps," the lieutenant rejoined. "'None but the brave deserve the fair,' however!"

"Do you know one Hank Holden, who lives hereabouts?" Shelby asked suddenly, with his eyes fixed on the woman's face. He thought the yellow of her cheeks grew a shade lighter, but she answered quietly and promptly:

"Naw; never heer'd on eny sech name!"

"But his 'paw,' who lives over yonder, told us we'd find his place somewhere near here," the trooper answered quickly. But the trap failed to spring, and the woman made no sign; only turning a shade whiter, as she bent over the child, now clinging closer to her with a great sob.

"There's no use asking questions here," Latham ventured to his senior. "We're only losing time, if the deserter has dared to come home."

"Right; we will beat every bush about this clearing," Shelby answered. "Squad, dismount; car-

bines, ready! Sergeant, divide the squads and search both banks of the creek!"

The men obeyed promptly, every three throwing their bridles to the fourth trooper; then dividing and plunging into the brush, carbine in hand.

"I respect your pluck, madam," the captain said bluntly, lifting his cap as he turned to follow. "If we catch your husband we'll bring him back this way before we carry him off."

The troopers searched through the clearing, and soon were heard on either side of the creek; shout and oath resounding through the wood, until the sounds of search died into distance. Then the woman who had stood still and firm as a figure in yellow clay, sank on her knees, lifting her drawn face to heaven in mute supplication, while the danger-aged girl stood by, listening intently for shot or signal. Neither came; and, after some minutes, the mother rose and broke the dead silence.

"Sneak down, Sis," she whispered, "en watch out fur yer dad. He may be elus' by yit, ef he hev fool'd 'em agin! Be ca'ful, gell, en not too bresh!"

The child only nodded, creeping toward the thicket and pausing often to watch and to listen. At length she parted the brush and stood warily on the very edge of the stream. The only sounds coming from the woods beyond were pipe of bird and hum of insect, no longer drowned by hint of "man's inhumanity to man." Nature, in her gentlest mood, seemed bent on erasing all memory of her recent invasion.

Yet the child moves but slowly up the bank, pausing to listen every few paces; for some spy might yet be lurking in the cover. But, after careful search convinces her none is near, she leans over the stream and gives the same owl-cry signal used by her grand-sire on the night before. Before the echo dies away a flurry of water comes from a rusty old log, lying near the opposite bank. Then the log moves, and from the water beneath it, appears the head of Hank Holden, dripping like that of a water-god. Skilled in the art elusive, by long practice and close escape, he had sunk to his neck in water and thrust his head into the convenient—and well remembered—hollow log!

“Lor’, dad! Thar yer be!” cries the midget, with as near approach to a dance of triumph as she could compass, “en’ yer’ve fooled ’em wunst mo’!”

“Yes, m’ little gell,” replies the cheery voice, as the man wades out and shakes himself like a Newfoundland dog. “Yer’ve got a dad yit, s’longez he lasts!”

CHAPTER V.

A MOUNTAIN DAISY.

A COMFORTABLE looking farm house in any of the picturesque coves of Sand Mountain, at the period of this chronicle, presented marked contrast to the war-harried region about it; and the cheery home on which the afternoon sun now slanted its rays, seemed a veritable oasis in the dinnerless desert to the eyes of weary beholders.

The farm—seated in a pleasant, red-soiled nook that nestled comfortably under the gray hill-crest protecting it from the north—showed evidences of careful and modern cultivation, while the barns and out-houses spoke of industrious thrift. The main dwelling was surrounded on all sides by ample and roofed porch; above it peered the peaked gables of the upper story, from the windows of which the mountain breeze flapped faultless dimity curtains, like long white flags of peace. But, dominating the roof, was an odd structure, which a first glance might have mistaken for a rack to dry clothes.

Closer inspection, however, had convinced the observer that it was intended for a lookout station, as the stripling son of the lord of the manor was stretched upon the roofed bench, horn in hand, to

sound the note of warning were man or woman seen approaching the house. For Farmer Freeman was a staunch rebel, and by entertainment of her soldiery and staunch devotion to the cause of the South, had made himself an object of no little enmity to deserter and bushwhacker, as well as to the less openly and practically pronounced adherents of the old flag. He lived in constant expectation of attack; kept a well supplied arsenal in his house; and his farm hands—all reliable, but aged or disabled men—and his strippling boy were ever ready to respond to a call to arms.

But on this perfect summer afternoon, the peaceful visitor to Freeman Farm would have found all as quiet and orderly as though war had not visited the land. The old farmer and all hands are busy in the fields, while the lowing of cattle and the soft clucking of motherly hens, watching pridefully the incursions of ambitious broods into new foraging territory, alone break the stillness. One other sound comes from time to time; the pleasant one of a clear, girlish voice, crying:

“Chick, chick! Here chick! Ducky, ducky, here!”

Hens and chickens, ducks and ducklings, respond quickly to this call, while even the lordly rooster and self-sufficient turkey-cock drop their tails, and their dignity at the same time, all centering about the graceful figure of the farmer's daughter.

Jen Freeman, as she stands with one hand scattering dampened meal and the other supporting on her shapely hip a great, yellow crock, may not seem a beauty, save on the trite basis of “handsome is as

handsome does." Far less is there anything of the heroine about the girl; but, in that summer of 1863, the North Alabama farmer was indeed fortunate, whose barnyard was unstripped of poultry; and this particular farmer's daughter is thankful enough to have something for them to eat. And feeding chickens, while perhaps a less romantic avocation than caring for canaries, may yet be deemed far more useful.

And Jen Freeman—so all who know her avouch—is a useful and very practical young woman. Brought up on the home farm, save a few years of "finishing" at a seminary of Nashville, life has brought her so far no illusions; more happily still, none of what is misnamed "romance." Boys she had known and liked, as boys, romping, riding and—be not shocked!—bird-nesting with them; but such intercourse had developed healthful muscle rather than unhealthy sentimentality; and her lungs and her conscience are both rarely sound.

Novels she had read; but they were of the innocuous school chosen by a careful father, bereft of his helpmeet during the young girl's childhood. Well thumbed, and equally well remembered, copies of Maria Edgeworth, Mrs. Southworth and Washington Irving still flank "the Waverly," under the neat checked curtain of the book-shelves in her sitting room. "Marmion," Mrs. Hemans, and especially Longfellow's earlier poems, were her ideals of that divine art; nor was she ignorant of Campbell and Gray's "Elegy." But Jen Freeman had no pretension to being well-read, if indeed she knew that much

abused term. She had only read well what books good fortune had placed in her hands; digesting at leisure all she swallowed, and remaining wholly free from even a *soupçon* of mental dyspepsia.

Does this indicate that she was a *rara avis*? Then were the Southern hills of that day productive of many a "sable swan." Through her practical and prosaic life of farm-house duty—later deeply underscored by war's privations and alarms—day-dreams had doubtless come to her; and through them may have shone, half understood, gleams of

"The light that never was on sea, or land."

What girl of eighteen, in healthful country air, or city forcing-house, but has built her castles in the air? Jen Freeman's were of that card-house structure which toppled down, turret and foundation, at the first touch of matter-of-fact realism; and no gloomy regrets hung about their ruins. There are few Prince Charmings in North Alabama mountains at their best, and now, all of them had ridden away to the war. So, as yet, the mountain daisy only knew that she possessed a heart by its quicker palpitation after a run, or on the approach of the blue-coated raiders.

That she is pretty,—indeed, possessed of large possibilities of beauty,—her white draped mirror tells her each time those shy, brown eyes look from it honestly into her own; while short, clustering curls of ruddy gold—red in the sun, brown in the shadow—shade her rosy cheeks and her nose, a trifle turned up. Nor is it "tip-tilted, like the petal of a flower;"

for truly that piquant and expressive feature is somewhat browned by mountain sun, and not wholly unspashed with freckles by the health-giving breeze.

Dainty and attractive, even in her simple frock and stout shoes, she is the more attractive from unconsciousness of both; and the refinement of movement and gesture—showing as the brown, but small, hands nimbly ply their useful work—is that born solely of pure, womanly nature. There is no hint of that meretricious substitute—mock-turtle soup of manner—too often produced by the finishing school, and made *consommé* by society conventionality.

But, to come back to farm-yard reality, Jen Freeman is feeding her chickens, innocent of thought that any possible Prince Charming is riding down to meet her; that the blind goddess—who truly should have been the mother of Master Cupid—is throwing two young people into that propinquity which is so apt to do the rest. For, let poets sing what they may of Master Cupid, the true torch-bearers to the Hymen of to-day are named Propinquity and Chance!

Suddenly, from the roof lookout, comes a horn blast more sonorous than musical; and Jen—stopping with fear-arrested hand still full of meal—turns her bright face curiously to the sound, as she calls:

“What is it, Will? Yanks?”

“Soldiers! Our’n, I think!” responded the youthful warder. “Yes, they’re gray, sho’!”

The girl ran to a little knoll beyond, commanding equal view of fields and road, seized a little white flag and waved it high over her head. Her act

arrested the flurry of the working men, each of whom had dropped his hoe and turned toward the house. They quietly resumed work, only the master of the place coming on toward the knoll, whence his daughter now peered eagerly up the curving descent of the steep hillside.

Ere he joined her, the column hove in sight round the turn nearest the great gate; the farmer went straight toward it, and Miss Jen discreetly returned to her chickens—whether counting them prematurely, or not, some pretended judge of woman may divine.

The horsemen moved slowly down; jaded, unfed beast and weary man alike seeming unfit for rapid movement. But revived by the peaceful and inviting aspect of the farm, and by that hope of supper which springs eternal in the young cavalryman's breast, Mr. Beverly Latham gathered his horse, resettled himself in saddle and grew blithe again, as he remarked:

"An oasis—or a mirage! But unless you assure me, Cap., that this farmer is a sound old reb, hanged if I don't 'dissart' and join our slippery friend, Hank Holden, in hiding!"

"The Confed. need not lose—sha'n't lose you yet, Bev.," his senior answered. "Farmer Freeman is not only a staunch patriot, but a personal friend of mine; and his daughter's kitchen—"

"Jephthah of old—" the lieutenant interrupted his senior, only to interrupt himself, as the farmer swung the great gate wide and ran out into the sandy avenue they had just reached.

"Welcome! Ride in, boys!" he cried, heartily, as the column halted. "How are you, Shelby? Glad am I to see ye! The sight of the gray is good for sore eyes in this God-forsaken country! Ride in an' 'light!" He reached out a brown hand and warmly shook the captain's, as he added: "But the beasts look 'bout done up. Care for your horses, men, and then I'll care for you. Ride right in—your boys know, Shelby; the well-yard, to the right!"

"Thank you, Mr. Freeman," Shelby answered, returning the hand shake cordially. "You are as whole-souled and true hearted as ever, I see. Let me introduce my lieutenant, a new officer in these parts; Mr. Latham, of Virginia."

"Glad to welcome you, lieutenant, for your gray coat and true heart under it," the farmer responded. "Still more glad, as you're a Virginian! Great state, sir; mother of presidents! But, 'light, gentlemen; Jerry, here, 'll care for your horses, while the men feed theirs. Come into the house, and have a wash and a drop of apple jack!"

Soon—the stains of a hard day's march removed and a long day's hunger fresh-edged by a nip of good apple brandy—the officers followed their host to the well-yard. Brief inspection was needed. The well-rubbed beasts were already munching contentedly such provender as was rare to their tastes; and the men, ranged on the long benches, were eating with true soldiers' appetite the inviting cornbread and clean, crisp meat, promptly ordered to them by Miss Jen's forethought. Laughter and chaff resounded, not stopped, under lax discipline of those days, by the

officers' approach; for the Confederate scouts thereabout who could stop at Freeman Farm all knew that the lines had to them fallen in pleasant places.

"You certainly are a trump, Mr. Freeman!" Shelby exclaimed. "You'd give your last crumb to the boys."

"Well, I hope never to be put to that test," the farmer rejoined, heartily. "But, 'tell then, they're welcome to share what I have."

"And, really, those fellows seem awfully hungry, Mr. Freeman," Latham remarked, with a sly tug at his belt buckle. "One might guess that the beggars had eaten no breakfast!"

"By gum! I forgot," the old man rejoined, with a jovial laugh. "Shelby told me he hadn't 'fed for a week,' so come back to the house. Jen 'll row me anyway, if her supper gets cold!"

Briskly the hungry officers followed their host back to the house, crossing the broad porch into the quaint sitting room, with its stiff legged, horse-hair sofas and chairs, prim book shelves and impossible portraits. But the touches of a tasteful woman's hand modernized its general aspect, setting a fancy cushion here, a potted plant there, and looping back the faultlessly white curtains with jaunty bows of blue ribbon. Against the wall stood a stiff, spindle shanked piano—an upright, of uncertain age, with yellow keys suggestive of quavering tone. But it stood open; and music on the rack showed that its mistress kept it for use rather than ornament.

And that mistress stood at the open porch window, fresh, simple, and smiling cordial welcome, with the natural grace of her slim figure enhanced by hospitable haste to feed the hungry.

"Jen, my dear, you know Cap'n Shelby. Let me introduce Lieutenant Latham,—of Virginia,—a new-comer, but mighty welcome. This is my little house-keeper, sir; the apple of my eye and the best little girl—if I do say it myself—'tween the Gulf of Mexico and Tennessee river!"

The smiling face turned to the captain, and the extended hand that had warmly welcomed him, turned at the father's overfond praise toward the stranger. On the face the flush of health and pleasure deepened a shade, and the hand fell, giving place to a pretty courtesy, as the girl's eyes met those of the younger soldier. In them was a look of wondering inquiry, plainly dominated by warm admiration. For Beverly Latham's thoughts had been more intent upon the cravings of his stomach than of his heart; and any stray speculation about another girl—"with freckles, red-hair, pug nose and a dirty sunbonnet—" had promptly fled from his brain when the farmer mentioned the long-craved supper. The nose before him now was perhaps a pug; but its owner was plainly a lady, and a graceful, winsome one, besides. So the young trooper stared with rather plain surprise, as he made his best bow; and—for the instant—even thought of supper fled.

"I am cordially glad to see you, too, Mr. Latham," the girl said frankly and simply, but the gratified curving of the youth's mustache halted in mid-twist,

as she added naïvely: "for you wear the gray jacket, so dear, while so rare, among us. We must shake hands, too, for I welcome you as a friend—although a stranger."

Nothing could have been neater than the girl's manner and her words, as she extended her hand frankly. But, society had not yet tempered the youth's bearing into full discretion; and surprised pleasure caused so warm a pressure of the tanned, but slim, fingers, that Miss Jen's color deepened a bit, as she hastily withdrew them from his reluctant clasp.

"Come, papa," she said, promptly moving forward with Shelby, "your supper will be cold, and I presume your guests are hungry."

"We are not, Miss Freeman!" Latham cried, recovering from the gaucherie of surprise. "We are simply ravenous! I admit it in advance, to warn you of what your own penetration would soon discover. Captain Shelby has already told your father that we have not had what our men call 'a square meal' for a week!"

The girl showed even, white teeth between the red lips that threw him the reply, over her shoulder:

"I'm so glad, Mr. Latham! Then you will not criticise my shortcomings as a housekeeper."

For many a week the troopers had not sat down to so neat a table, or so lavishly spread with every luxury possible to that isolated region, in those days of privation to all and of penury to the many. And to one of them the zest of healthy appetite, long unsatisfied, was added to no little by the frank and

cordial talk of both father and daughter, aided by the winning smile and quietly sweet voice of the latter.

Under the warmth of their welcome and the comfort of that home, the soldiers forgot war and trial; gathering, while they might, the roses that Fortune strewed in their path.

"I really envy you, Mr. Freeman," Latham said, after masticatory silence and with a mouth not wholly empty, as he passed his plate for a third half of a fried chicken. "You make us forget there is a war, your home is so happy and peaceful."

"Not so peaceful as you might suppose," Jen answered, brightly. "Don't you know that we have been attacked several times by bushwhackers; and that papa keeps a standing army of his own?"

"Yes; but my little girl won't hear to leaving me, lieutenant," the proud parent answered. "Even when her aunt in Wilmington writes to urge her to pay a long visit."

"How could I go?" the girl cried, growing grave at once. "I'm not one bit afraid here, Captain Shelby; but, were I away from papa, I should have constant dread of his meeting the fate of our poor neighbor, old Simpson."

"And what did the bloody rascals do to him?" Shelby asked, soldiery coming back after hunger was appeased.

"I will tell you over our pipes, on the gallery," the host replied, as they rose from table and moved toward the sitting room. There Miss Jen lit the oil lamp, not accepting proffered assistance from

Latham, and her father took corncob pipes from the mantel, filling them from a fat tobacco jar. Soon two pipes glowed on the gallery, under the fast-falling darkness, as their perfume wafted out into the leaf-scented air of night.

But the junior officer lingered within, turning the music on the piano rack, by way of a talk motor, as he said:

"I hope I am not detaining you from household duties, Miss Freeman. If I am, give me marching orders for the gallery; but—you sing, do you not?"

"A little; and I just love to!" the girl answered, frankly. "Of course, I am pretty busy after supper awhile; but I'll try and amuse you with a song, first—if you wish."

"I certainly do wish," the youth answered, with emphasis, and not without a long look of evident admiration at the girl's face. "I, too, love music; and something tells me that we are congenial."

But the mountain girl, busy over her music, never caught the meaning in his glance; and, if she noticed that in the tone he used, she showed no desire to accept its challenge to quick flirtation. She calmly arranged the leaves, ran her brown fingers easily across the keys; then sang, in a full and pleasant, but quite untrained, soprano, "When the dew is on the blossom." Then, unasked and naturally, she broke into "Wild roved an Indian Maid, bright Alfarata," giving the whole biography and habitat of that dusky maiden, while the young soldier kept time with his unlit pipe, and his eyes showed more admi-

ration of the girl's graceful figure, than delight at her music.

"That young woman had found 'roving' rather risky hereabouts, just now," he said, as she finished. It was the perfunctory speech of the listener, expected to say something; for the man's own taste was not uncultivated; and his sister at home was a real musician.

"You don't like my songs!" The girl looked up at him frankly, a smile on her lips and dancing in her brown eyes. "I find they go more nicely with most visitors than my own kind of music.—Oh! how mean of you!" she cried, suddenly, flushing as she spoke. "You ought to have told me *you* were a musician!"

"I came from George Washington's state; and 'I cannot tell a'—thumper like that," Latham laughed back. "I love music; but I only hum a little."

"Sit right down, then," Miss Jen ordered, saucily, "and 'hum a little' for me! Now, don't be mean again—*please!*" she added as she rose and pointed to the horse-hair music-stool.

"But I cannot play," he protested, shaking his head. "I do not know a note."

"If they're simple, maybe I know the accompaniments," Jen said, doubtfully. "What do you sing? Honor bright, Mr. Latham, or you're mean."

"'Beloved Star,'—or 'Eveline,'—perhaps—"

"I know them both! What key?" Miss Jen broke in, clapping her hands; and soon the youth's rich, mellow baritone trolled out all about, "Thou art so near and yet so far!"

The girl listened with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, to a different voice and more tasteful method than any she recalled. Then, asking no permission, she played the prelude of "Eveline," then so popular in Virginia.

The grassy mound has long rested on well-loved lips that made that song familiar, round artillery campfires of the mother state; brave lips and tender, that thundered the command in hottest flashes of the battle, or softened to plaint in the wooing notes of song. Better music they may write and sing to-day; none better worth recalling, when coupled with the ever-sweet memory of the gallant soldier, sleeping so well after life's fitful fever!

And now, his young namesake sang, with more expression than before; and Jen Freeman's face flushed deeper at the words:

"Could affection make election—
Could my heart but choose its queen;
One maid alone should hold the throne,
And her sweet name is—Eveline!"

"Oh, thank you!" she cried, with sparkling eyes as his voice died away. "You sing so well, Mr. Latham. Please try another."

"I fear you have exhausted my repertoire," he answered, "unless you know—" He named several songs, that had not found their way to this mountain nook; so the girl shook her head dolefully, at each.

"But to show I do thank you, I'll sing you *my* pet song," she said, naturally; adding with a smile: "No, it's not another 'Lorena'; it was mamma's

favorite, the only one I remember hearing her sing. You must know it."

Her face grew graver, as she played the prelude. Then, in better voice than before, with far more feeling and delicacy than he had suspected, she sang Schubert's "Last Greeting." Then she rose, half reluctantly.

"I must send you out to papa now," she said. "You know I am housekeeper; but I'll join you gentlemen as soon as I can."

"It will seem long to me, however you hasten those duties," Latham began, in his best city manner. But the lithe figure of the girl was already moving about the table beyond, and the clatter of dishes was the sole response. With a smile at himself and a loving twist of his mustache, the cavalryman sauntered out on the gallery, and lit his long-forgotten pipe.

CHAPTER VI.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

"THE blood-thirsty devils!" Shelby was saying. "I'd like to catch them at such a game once! Latham, Mr. Freeman is telling me about a hideous outrage near here."

"Yes," the farmer answered, removing the pipe from his mouth, "old man Simpson lived about ten miles from here, on the Guntersville road. He was a quiet, hard-working old fellow, minded his own business and never pestered his neighbors about politics. One day he caught a mean cuss that worked round his place stealing his meat, and sent him about his business. Just for revenge, that skunk started the rumor that Simpson had gold buried under his house. You know, of course, captain, that the deserters and bushwackers round this section are banded together in a sort of irregular army, under an outlaw named Hess, that they call general."

"Yes, I have a description of Hess," Shelby answered, "and I propose hunting up his headquarters, soon."

"And I needn't remind you," Freeman resumed, "what cruel and relentless devils these bushwackers

are. They'd burn a house they had plundered for very wantonness; and they'd shoot a man from the bush—Confed., or Federal, alike—for the chance of getting his hat or his shoes. They respect neither friend nor foe, and only necessity of personal safety holds them together."

"And the fact that they have nothing to steal," Latham added. "Else they'd bushwhack one another, just to keep their hands in."

"I know the gentry pretty well," the captain said, quietly, from behind a cloud of smoke. "They are of the same breed, all along the Cumberland range. I ran their gauntlet last year myself."

"How? We never heard you speak of that," Latham said, with interested curiosity.

"No, it was only one of a hundred cases, and before you joined," the captain answered. "I was captured and carried to Southern Ohio. Prisoners were in the way; meat was scarce; and drumhead court-martial was the easiest solution of the problem. Several of our men had been reported hung as spies—or 'lost' on the road. I was tried by a trumped-up court, and the verdict was a foregone certainty. I did not care to wait for hearing it, and that night I was fortunate enough to escape. In hiding the next day, a relative gave me a horse, a splendid Kentucky thoroughbred, and by night I dodged the pickets and rode into Kentucky. But the bushwhackers were thicker in Southern Kentucky than the Federals, and they were even more dangerous to meet. I dared not show on any road by day. I'd have been shot from the bush, for the sake of my horse, to a dead cer-

tainty. So, I hid all day, and that night I rode a full hundred miles, 'twixt dusk and dawn, straight through the hornet's nest!"

"By gum! that was splendid!" cried the host.

"Hardly—for the horse!" the trooper replied, drily.

"What became of him?" Latham asked.

"I signaled Morgan's pickets at the river," Shelby answered. "They sent a boat across, and I had scarcely boarded her, when one of the men bantered me for a trade. His beast was a sorry, half-starved one, but I closed at once, as he was stuck on mine."

"That was very grateful of you!" the farmer cried.

"Very—indeed," Shelby returned, slowly; and he blew a long, blue cloud, and watched it rise, as he added, meditatively: "We swapped while my horse was warm. I guess he was stiff as bar iron, next day; but I—was at headquarters then."*

Farmer Freeman only gave a significant grunt, as he refilled his pipe. Then he resumed:

"Well, Hess and his gang got hold of the gold rumor. They attacked Simpson's house one night, seized the old man and tied him up by the thumbs, demanding his gold. In vain the poor old fellow swore that he had none. Them scoundrels, under orders of their head-devil, Hess, set fire to the house and rode away, leaving Simpson tied at his own door! He was literally roasted alive!"

"Great heavens!" the lieutenant exclaimed. "What devils incarnate these outlaws must be!"

*Fact; the escape, ride and trade of a Confederate captain.

"Not all of them," the farmer answered, "but a right smart sprinklin' of 'em, anyway."

"I hope, Cap., that we'll get a chance at this General Hess before we're ordered to rejoin," the junior officer said. "Nothing would please me better than giving him a show of his own tactics!"

"Have you any positive facts, Mr. Freeman, as to the present whereabouts of Hess and his gang?" the captain asked.

As the words came, a flash was seen in the darkness in front of them; and simultaneously a bullet buried itself in the boards, just between the farmer's head and that of the speaker.

"Seems to me," Freeman answered coolly, as he rose from his chair, "that some o' the gang ain't so very far away from here!"

A rush of men from the well-yard toward the sound followed the shot; the woods about the house were carefully beaten, but no trace of an enemy could be found, and the soldiers were recalled. At the porch, as they returned, the officers found Miss Jen, quiet and unflurried as though no unusual excitement had arisen.

"I hope you were not much frightened, Miss Freeman," Latham called, before the other could speak.

"I was not frightened at all," the girl answered simply. "The house has been shot at twice before, but papa says it is only wantonness. But to-night, it must have been a chance passer, or he would have known we were better protected than ever."

"You should be a soldier, Miss Jen," Shelby said, gallantly. "Your coolness would shame many a

trooper's. But to-morrow we will visit the headquarters of this late-moving general. We must move early—so, good-night, Miss Jen."

"I will be up when you wake," the girl answered, as she lit a home-made candle, in an old time china stick, and handed it to her father. "Papa will show you your room; pleasant dreams."

"Do you indulge in dreams, Miss Freeman?" the lieutenant asked, pausing in the window, near her. He had been out in the darkness of the porch, seemingly examining the hole made by the bullet.

"Not often, Mr. Latham," she answered, naturally. "I work so hard, after rising so early, that I generally sleep too soundly for dreams."

"So do I," the youth replied, gaily. "Either my conscience is too good, or I have none at all; so the people of air whisk by me unnoted. But perhaps I *will* dream—to-night."

"Of what?" she asked, innocently. "Of General Hess?"

"Of a far more dangerous theme—to me!" the youth replied, with what he supposed an intense glance, but not forgetting a dainty twirl of his mustache. "Can you not imagine reason for my dreams?"

"Indeed, I cannot," she began, naïvely, "unless it was your—" She stopped, blushing, looking down in some confusion.

"Go on! *Please* finish! Unless it was my—what?" Lieutenant Latham urged, with more earnestness than the occasion seemed to warrant. "*Please* finish your sentence! I beg it as a favor."

"I cannot! Don't ask me!" Jen retorted, growing deeper red and holding out her hand—"Good-night!—and *pleasant* dreams, if any."

"Good-night, then." Latham took the outstretched hand deferentially, and held it while he added: "You *might* gratify my wish and tell me the word you omitted. You will not? Then good-night. I will see you to say good-bye."

He moved toward the stairs, following the others. And Jen Freeman, absently arranging the music and closing the piano, heaved a rather petulant sigh, as she said to herself:

"I'm just too awkward for anything! I never *will* have what aunty calls tact! Oh! I do *wonder* if he guessed? And besides, poor fellow—it wasn't so bad. He had n't eaten before, all day."

In their room—good-nights spoken and the farmer's firm tread echoing down the stair—the future troop commander remarked:

"Rather nice people, Cap., these friends of yours. And his daughter—"

"Has a pug nose, and wears freckles and a sun-bonnet," the senior cut in, as he kicked off his long, rusty boots. "But let's turn in, Bev. We must start early to catch General Hess at home."

"Cap., I rather imagine we should look for our bad marksman of to-night nearer than Hess' ranch," the youngster said, suddenly.

"Why, what do you mean, Bev.?"

"Only that the Holden family owe us a return visit in ordinary courtesy, Cap. I dug this out of

the plank,"—he rolled a flattened bullet on the floor toward his chief,—“and it fits a hunting rifle!”

“By Jove! you’re right, my boy,” the captain said, examining his sub’s trophy. “We’ll keep our eyes on the ‘loyalist,’ too. Thanks for the hint.”

But it did not affect the captain’s nerves, for in five minutes he was snoring with the regularity, and with much the rattle, too, of file-firing. But not so Mr. Latham. Half disrobed, he moved to the window, watching the moon as her pale yellow disc popped over the north acclivity, as yet only silvering the tallest of the tree tops.

Possibly to the discredit of his soldierly zeal it was, that he rather regretted the good condition of the rested and well-fed horses he had examined after the bootless hunt just passed. Nor is it wholly flattering to his sentiment that memories of the late supper mingled with those of Jen Freeman’s pleasant face and unmarred naturalness, as swift changes followed each other in his brain. Then came memories of other faces, dark and fair, haughty or pleading—which had come into his brief experience of society while a cadet at Lexington, or had glided momentarily across his busy path in two years of service. But none had left very clear negatives before his “snap shot” camera; and flirtation, with him, had been merely preliminary skirmish before that serious battle of feeling which comes to every man, soon or late. He might have been grazed more than once; but, never seriously wounded, he bore no scar from conflict and was ever eager to enter it

again. Handsome, jaunty and brave, Bev. Latham had ever been a favorite with women, and was the idol of the grand old mother and the brilliant sister, now thinking so fondly of their boy at the far-away homestead. And then, quick movement of unbridled thought bore him across the stirring scenes of combat and of skirmish. His first ordeal of fire passed before him; he recalled the strangeness of sensation—which was scarcely fear, but was very far from exhilaration—as the first volley of Miniés passed with ugly whir, and uglier thud as they met resisting flesh. Again he felt the hot thirst of fever, as he lay wounded before the crescent of Malvern Hill, so yearning for one sip of muddy water as to be careless of the balls that ploughed the field about him. That brought thought of the gallant comrades he had left in Virginia; some still battling for the loved soil—others so still beneath it! And, once more, he felt the *ennui* of the camp of instruction; to which distasteful duty convalescence sent him, before his transfer to cavalry and to duty in a distant state, more active but scarcely less distasteful. And was this hunting of starved deserters—this arresting of wretched conscripts, dodging duty—to be the end of bright hopes and high ambitions that had lured him, school boy as he was, into the ranks?

“I’m hanged if I like this hunting of men,” he grumbled to himself. “No soldier ought to like it; and none who do not see the misery and the temptation to desert could really understand it. But, it’s all right, I suppose, so long as it is duty; but I’d

rather be at the front, all the same—especially, with the A. N. V. But, what's the use of grumbling here?" he added, with a yawn. "I'd better sleep and enjoy Miss Jen's good breakfast. It will be long enough before I get another. Pretty girl, too; and so natural. Don't suppose that girl ever had a lover in her life. Pity to waste her, up here, too. She seems purity itself and—Hello! what's that?"

He interrupted himself suddenly, reaching instinctively for his pistol, lying on the bureau. Then he drew back into the shadow of the white curtain, watching intently the broad, open space before the house. The moon was riding higher above the trees now, throwing broad gleam against his window, but leaving the yard below still in shadow, where dark objects would be invisible. But from the shadow of the house there glided a white-clad form slowly and noiselessly across the shadow, and seemingly stopping to listen every few steps, and to watch the windows of the house intently.

Instinctively the soldier dropped his pistol on the moving figure, covering its every motion. Twice it stopped, hesitant; then approached the house again, as if undecided. Then, with seeming conquest of indecision, it turned and moved toward the gate—still carefully and noiselessly, but with swifter motion.

"There's no sort of doubt!" Latham muttered. "It is a woman! What in the deuce can she be doing out at this hour? It must be after midnight; it can't be a robber, and—by Jove!" he added, suddenly, "it can't be Jen Freeman!"

He turned from the window and rapidly drew on his boots and coat, muttering as he started for the stairway:

"It's strange enough to warrant, anyway. I'll do a little volunteer scouting on my own hook."

He descended the stairs softly and turned into the sitting room. The porch-window was open, and the moon, just touching the roof's edge now, shed a weird half-light into the room. Pausing in the dark hall, the man again thumbed his pistol hammer; peering into the half-light for any intruder, confederate of the one outside. Dead silence reigned, nor could he see form or movement in the barely furnished room; so the ardent young soldier—his ardor piqued by novelty of adventure—moved cautiously into the room and made for the open window.

As he reached it, a white robed figure faced him, coming from the porch, and a soft voice—quickly rising into comical terror—called:

"Is that you, papa? Did you hear him—Oh! Mr. Latham! don't come out here! I'm not dre—I'm sure I didn't expect—*Please!* go up stairs!"

"Certainly, Miss Freeman," the soldier answered, executing a quick right-about. "But can I be of any use? Was there any alarm?"

"No—nothing! Go to bed, *please!* I don't want anything! *Please* go! And—Mr. Latham," the girl added pleadingly from the darkness without—"Please don't mention this to papa! It's no use, you know. Good-night, again."

Without reply, Beverly Latham tipped back

upstairs, drew off his boots, for the second time, and threw himself softly on the bed. He lay perfectly still for many minutes, stretching his hand instinctively to touch his revolver butt, as he rolled over at last to sleep. But he muttered, as concluding some train of thought:

“I suppose I made an ass of myself, too! It is none of my business,—but it *is* devilish odd, all the same!”

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE OUTLAW'S NEST.

THAT extremely rare species, the modest youth, ever infrequent in the genus man, was more rare than before during the war days; a result due partly to opportunity, and somewhat to the prevalence of buttons and tarnished lace. This is not to be accepted as implication that the species has become more numerous, in this A. D. 1893; but with the present, this veracious record of the past has naught to do.

That Lieutenant Latham's diffidence was not his most apparent weak point has, perhaps, been proved already. Yet the Virginian was no fop; for the absorbing vocation he had assumed, with its frequent serious responsibilities, had prevented that sort of self-deification. And, as his nocturnal introspection told, he had not disported as a "lady-killer," even while he had accepted the gage tossed before him by more than one little glove. But he was young, enthusiastic and easy of speech; and, while not too susceptible, his judgment of a pretty face or of a piquant manner was perhaps nearly as correct as that of his mount,—natural and educated horseman as he was. So, in the wilds of the mountains, as on the plains of Virginia, Mr. Latham was fairly safe in the gentler

trading of sentiment, even while he might have been at disadvantage in the sharp "jockeying" of fast society.

But, as he rode away from Freeman Farm, that bright and fresh-scented July morning, the young soldier was unusually quiet. To his senior's surprise, the wonted chaff and nonsense, illustrated by glib and saucily twisted quotation, were wholly absent; and the pair rode along, with only duty-forced talk as to the road, or the result of the day's march.

At dawn's first gleam, Freeman had found the lieutenant in the well-yard, carefully acting as stable-lieutenant and inspecting the squad. He had thoughtfully ordered omission of bugle call; so as not to advertise to prowling bushwhackers the movement of his troop, which might bring vengeance on the hospitable farm that had sheltered it. But the men were ready mounted, on horses strangely freshened by rest and two good feeds, and soon the captain joined him and the march was taken up once more. Already Miss Jen had dealt out coffee and food to the men; and the officers had eaten such a breakfast, as might have caused a foolish virgin to doubt her own memory of the previous supper.

The last adieux had been spoken, and the younger soldier's clasp had held the slim, brown hand of the girl, rather beyond the bounds of strict convention. Nor had it then been relinquished, without a pressure scarcely mistakable. But the frank, brown eyes, looking into his so calmly, never fell; nor was there any acknowledgment of that fact, by undue haste in the little fingers that withdrew from the

junior's clasp only to be frankly extended to the older friend.

"I am so glad you stopped, Captain Shelby," Miss Jen said. "I will not say a *real* 'good-bye' yet, as you may return this way from your hunt for Hess."

"Perhaps; and I hope duty will force us to," Shelby answered. "But we never know what detour noon may necessitate when we ride out at dawn."

"And I hope so too, Miss Freeman," Latham said, earnestly. "To spend another evening with you—and your music—I'd almost swear to bring you General Hess' head 'upon a charger,' or get knocked off my own. No; I won't say 'good-bye,' yet. The fellow was a fraud who wrote 'that sweet old word'—when 'tis so often bitter!"

Now the column had moved north two hours by sun, entering rougher ascending country, broken by rough defiles and abrupt gorges, scarce leaving any trail visible.

"What are you dreaming about, Bev?" the captain called suddenly. "A Confederate shinplaster for your thoughts."

"They are not worth it," the sub answered, quickly recovering. "But I wasn't dreaming; only remembering Farmer Freeman's larder—"

"And his brown eyed daughter, Bev?" the other finished for him. "Now, look here, my boy; Miss Jen is a special pet of mine, and I'll have no sort of entanglements of her fresh, young ideas."

"I don't understand you, Cap.," the youngster replied, gravely. "I don't think I'm a fool—"

"And I know she isn't!" Shelby again broke in. "I tell you, Bev., that little girl has less idea of flirtation than I have of theology. So be careful, should we ever chance at the farm again."

"She is a lady, and a very gentle, modest one," the sub replied, still gravely. "She's perfectly safe from any nonsense of mine, Cap. In fact," he added more jauntily, and twisting his mustache airily, "she has hardly 'sabe' enough to make *that* sort of thing sufficiently piquant. In fact, I was not dreaming of her."

"Glad of it," the other retorted, bluntly. "Better not dream of anything, but keep your eyes well open. This is about the dandiest spot for bushwhackers that I've seen for many a day."

The road they had followed now took still more abrupt ascent of the mountain side, the footing insecure from loose-washed stones—often round and smooth as marbles, from friction of winter torrents; and the hoofs of the horses often slipped on them. Huge, beetling boulders overhung the curving way on one hand, while on the other the narrow pathway shore off abruptly, almost overhanging the precipitous descent into the gloomy gulch below. There the tops of even the nearest and tallest trees were pigmied by the distance; and from the heights above them, and before them, a dozen determined men might have defied an army.

"Bad fix we might have been caught in here, had General Hess expected us," the captain said to his junior in a low tone. "But there must be a flat close above. They always break, after a defile like this.

Move up, men! Close up your ranks, sergeant!" he added aloud.

"Hello! listen to that," Latham answered. "The general may really be preparing some entertainment for us that we don't 'hanker arter.' This is the devil's own country, anyway!"

The sounds he noted, though coming from a distance, were clear to all ears now; the note of horns borne clear and sharp on the noon breeze. They came from all sides—from crest above and cove below; now seeming to recede and almost die away, then to rise again, vibrant and clear, as if in answer to some call.

"It's a regular code of signals, eh, Cap?" Latham said. "The outlaw *must* expect us and have an ambush ready," and the youth quietly drew his pistol and spun the chamber as he examined the caps. "As poor Bee said to his brigade: 'This is a good place to die in'!"

"You've something yet to learn of mountain fighting, Bev.," the captain answered, coolly. "That *may* be a signal—it may be a dinner horn. But it is only one, and echo does the rest."

"Blessed be the horn, then!" Latham replied, glibly, himself in an instant. "As the cockney would quote: 'Appy the hower w'en th' 'orn of th' 'unter is 'eard hon th' 'ill!' if it presage dinner. I am as hungry as though Miss Jen Freeman were no cook!"

"Still harping on my daughter!" But look yonder!" the senior retorted, in his own vein, as he pointed over the abrupt crag straight ahead.

The sounds had died away. Dead stillness now

reigned, as though no spirit of the mountain had ever commanded:

Blow, bugle, blow! set the wild echoes flying!

Blow, bugle, blow! Answer echoes—dying, dying—dying!

But, in front of them, a spiral of thin, blue smoke curled over the crest; resting a moment on the breeze and then floating off into nothingness under the sunshine.

The horses, responding to spur and hand, clambered laboriously up the rougher ascent, scrambling onward to the crest. Fifteen minutes more brought them to the mountain top, stretching away into one of those level plateaus not infrequent after sharpest rises. A clear road showed before them, rocky, level and broken by no tree or bush. At its end a rude, but striking picture presented itself; a great log house, evidently inhabited by the smoke now pouring from the mud-daubed chimney at its either end. Back of the house the ground broke away precipitously; and down the mountain side poured a tumbling, foaming torrent of pure water, breaking over the rocks into silvery cascades and miniature waterfalls. For many yards in front of the house the ground was cleared of brush and larger stones; while a thick, prickly hedge of brush-like growth, which crossed the road, was reinforced by felled trees and unused brush. The house was evidently a dwelling; but it was a fortress as well, judging by the frequent small loopholes that pierced its log sides.

But war was not the idea of the garrison, if indeed any were present as the column approached. The

smoke came from a trash pile, still burning as they trotted briskly on, halting at safe distance, on the captain's command. At a sign Latham spurred forward—well covered by twenty carbines at ready, each instant expecting a volley from the abbatis. But none came, and he trotted along its length, only to find no sign of foe, and then to signal the party to advance.

"What 'ud yer hell-hounds want yere?" was the salutation Shelby received as he led his men through the narrow opening in the hedge.

The speaker was a woman in seeming; tho' her huge size, fierce features and brutal voice belied her sex, as she stood before the open doorway. She wore a man's hat on the red, unkempt hair that ran into regular whiskers on her heavy jaws; but her not too neat feet and heavy ankles were bare. In one hand she held a rusty, ugly-looking shot gun, and the other bore the long tin horn, with which she had lately given either call, or signal.

"Have I the honor of speaking to Mrs. Hess?" Shelby asked, carrying his hand to his cap mechanically.

"Wot in the devil 'ud ye want?" the Amazon answered, dropping the horn and grasping her gun with both hands.

"I want to see General Hess," the soldier answered. "I have called, with these gentlemen, to pay my respects."

"None o' yer palav'rin' with me, ef ye know wot's best fur ye!" the woman growled, betraying no fear;

and she raised the gun to her shoulder as the shaggy red eyebrows knitted menacingly.

"I'd advise you not to fire!" Shelby said, sternly. "It *might* be worse for you, though we do not intend to harm you."

"Harm—who?" the woman growled, but lowering her gun as the carbines came to a "ready," and adding: "I know how to take care ov myself, ef my man is away."

"Nobody could doubt your former statement one moment, madam, after looking at you once, however he might the second," Latham said, in his sweetest voice. "Does the general really risk leaving you alone up here—quite alone?"

"Ef he had n't, ye'd been packin' down th' mounting miles back," the woman answered, grimly.

"That we must convince ourselves," Shelby answered. "You need fear no harm, but duty is duty, Mrs. Hess. Sergeant, dismount the men and search the house and approaches," he added, as he dismounted. "Send a corporal and two men back to picket the road behind us."

"By Jupiter! Cap.," Latham said low to his chief, "she's a mountain Venus, with a vengeance! She'd shoot one of us quick as a wink, if she dared."

"She's a she-devil in petticoats," Shelby answered. "But I don't think she's lying. 'Her man' is off on some devil's mission, or, as she says, we'd never have come up so easily. We'll search the place, as matter of form; but we can't wait the gang's return, up here, without rations. He may be gone for days."

"Wish we could take him along," Latham replied, ruefully.

"I have no orders to arrest him," the senior answered. "I have no special charge against him; but now I know the road and the ranch, we can get him, whenever sent."

"Well, I'll scout down about this fall," the sub answered. "The scenery is worth looking at, and I may find out some new path."

So, while the troopers looked through the house and surroundings, they kept close watch on the Amazon; but she stood stolidly without, not even looking at them. Latham, finding a rough footway, descended the cliff about the fall, and was soon beyond sight of the house, and almost out of hearing of voices of his comrades. The scene was indeed a grand one, as the torrent fretted and leaped down the rock-ribbed cliff; and, standing on a projecting ledge, the youth was soon lost in its contemplation.

Suddenly his reverie was abruptly broken. He was almost sure he heard a suppressed cough near him. Turning swiftly, pistol in hand, he could see no one, nor any bush or other vantage likely to shelter a spy. But soldier instinct urged a search; and he moved along the ledge, seeking solution of what he could not believe a trick of his imagination. At last he found what appeared to be a narrow fissure in the rock, its mouth hidden from careless observation by sparse-growing bushes. Without a moment's hesitation the trooper moved toward the opening, pistol in hand, recking little of the rashness of invading a possible ambush. Full of reliance on himself, he

cautiously moved nearer, almost reaching the fissure, when the bushes parted at his side and a hand was laid softly on his arm. Instantly he turned, his cocked pistol raised and pointing full into the browned face of—a woman!

“Yer hain’t a-goin’ ter shoot, ez yer?” she cried, beseechingly, raising her clasped hands. “Yer hain’t furgot, hez yer? E’m ther wun yer seen yestiddy, wen you’uns war a-chasin’ my man.”

“Yes, I remember you,” Latham answered quietly, dropping his weapon. “I couldn’t well forget your face. You are Mrs. Holden?”

“Yes, E’m hur,” the woman replied, nervously. “En e tuk notis o’ yourn then, too. Yer hev a good face, soljer, en Lize Holden jess knows yer’ve got a kin’ heart.”

“I am obliged for your good opinion,” Latham answered, lightly. “But what are you doing in this wild spot, miles from your home? Ah! I see; that precious husband of yours trains with this outlaw Hess!”

For an instant the woman hesitated; her face growing a paler yellow under his scrutiny. But it was only for an instant. Then, with the seemingly natural gift of the mountaineer for lying, she answered in a deep whisper, glancing nervously over her shoulder as she spoke:

“I’ll tell yer ther truth, soljer, sho’s th’ Lord’s a-lookin’ at me now. Hank Holden hain’t never dun’ a wrong ’long o’ no man, er wumun, ’round yere. He hain’t never yit seen Hess, nur nun’ er hez gang! I jes’ swar thet, by little Johnnie’s grave!”

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Jess ben' cross ther cove, ter carry grub ter my man! He's a lyin' out on ther mounting, a-tryin' ter git 'cross ter Bragg!"

"Very likely!" the soldier answered. "And you are helping him to 'git 'cross ter Bragg,' eh?"

Again the woman hesitated, but only an instant before replying:

"I wer' plum' worrited out; an' I cum roun' by hither, ter see Miss Hess, an' ax' sum grub, wen I year'd ther dinner horn! I hev caught er cole, an' ud a got by yer, 'cep'n I hed ter cough, jess now."

"Oh, that's all, is it?" Latham answered, but half reassured. "Well, my good woman, I *am* sorry for you, and for that poor devil of yours whom we failed to catch yesterday."

"Wot 'ud Bragg do ter Hank, ef yer hed cotched 'im?" the woman asked, eagerly.

"I suppose he would have him shot," the soldier answered, carelessly.

"But, ef Hank cud git 'cross? Ef he cud go back out o' his own will, free an' willin'?" she urged, eagerly.

"I'm afraid he'd be tried, all the same, for deserting the service of his country."

"His kentry!" the woman whimpered. "Ez Bragg's army his kentry? Ar' ther Cornfed'rits his kentry? Wot hev Hank got ter do with surceshun? Th' ole kentry an' th'ole flag war good 'nuff fur him! Hank's paw fit inter ther war with ther Mexerkins, an' he bret up his boy ter luv ther flag. We hain't never hed no niggers, hez we? Ther men

wot owns 'em be ther men wot orter fite fur 'em! But ther cornscripturs, they dregged Hank ter ther war. W'en I war ill an' th' boy war a-dyin', th' wurd war sont ter Hank; an' w'en 'e beg't an' pray't, his cap'n fair laffed en his face. 'Course he put out fur home, axin' no man's leave, nor n'uther! An' now you'uns be huntin' Hank, jes' ez ef he war a cat, out on ther mounting. Ef his kentry's a-doing thet, he'd be a mighty better off ef he hedn't no kentry!"

The woman spoke rapidly, in high, rasping voice, distinct at some distance. But as she ceased, she buried her face in her hands, sobbing bitterly and shivering as though in a nervous chill.

Latham stood irresolute and uncomfortable. It is stated—mainly by crusty old bachelors—that married men grow accustomed to female tears, knowing that they may be as readily dried as were those of Juno, when she gained her point with Jove, after his too marked attention to Europa, or some other of his numerous and scantily draped flames. But the bachelor is apt to surrender at discretion, as soon as woman begins to weep, and Latham was a young bachelor, and much opposed to anything lugubrious. Devoted as he was to the cause of the South, and fully convinced of its perfect justice, he was still wrought up to deep sympathy with the woman before him. Brief experience among these mountaineers had convinced him how little they had to gain from any change in the government of the country, or, indeed, from any government at all.

Besides, he well knew the difficulty of obtaining furlough in the Army of Tennessee, however dire the strait of him who sought it. So, with blending of contradictory feelings, he said to the sobbing woman:

"Your case is a pretty hard one, Mrs. Holden. I don't see how it could well be worse. But you should not judge the great struggle we are making for independence by what you suffer on these mountains. I am deeply sorry for you, but your husband should not have made your case harder by running away from his duty. Officers cannot yield to all tales of sick wives and starving families; but now that I know the facts I will do all I can for your husband. Go and tell him to come in and surrender, and I'll do all I can to have him pardoned and returned to duty. I am only a lieutenant, but I have friends at Bragg's headquarters."

"Bless yer kin' face an' yer kin' words," the woman whined, with a half-sob and half-grin that showed her unbrushed teeth. "I'll min' yer fur 'em fur menny er day!"

She paused an instant, snivelling but toying with the dirty folds of her dress. Then she drew nearer, with a cunning gleam in her greenish eyes, as she looked uneasily over her shoulder, ere she whispered very low:

"Yer ben't sot on ther farmer's gell, be ye? I 'low yer be, tho', ez yer be a-singin' o' songs 'long o' her."

"What in the devil do you mean?" Latham blurted out, surprised beyond deference to sex. But the woman only grinned another yellowish grin, nodding



"LIZE AR' HE PLUM GONE?"—Page 97.

her head with sickly effort at archness. Disgusted and angry with himself, for so much parley, the trooper turned away abruptly, striding toward the steep acclivity. Reaching it, he turned and said, abruptly:

"You'd better keep your tongue still, to warn that husband of yours. His only chance is to come in and surrender." Then he clambered up the ascent, soon regaining the crests.

Scarcely had he reached it, when the woman coughed once more; and, as though in answer, came a cough from the fissured rock. Then the head of Hank Holden appeared through the bushes, as he whispered:

"Lize, ar' he plum gone?"

"Yes, Hank, he ar plum gone!"

"It war well fur 'im, ez yer techt 'im, Lize," the deserter said; and he emerged from the cover, grasping a long, keen knife in his bony hand.

"But, Hank, he ar' friendin' yer now, my man. Ef ye'll gie up to 'em, he's swore ter help yer."

"Gie up ter they?" The man's face set hard and stern, and his voice hardened. "Not s'long ez tha's a huntin' Hank Holden, same ez er cat! W'en I do go back, Lize, ut'll be 'cos I knows I hez *th' rite* ter go! I shan't be druv, gell; an' et's lucky fur 'm yer stopt th' hunter whar yer did!"

He clinched the knife firmer, as he raised his arm with ugly menace, but the woman laid her hand upon it, repeating:

"But, Hank, he ar' friendin' yer, now!"

He only shook his head grimly, as he muttered stolidly:

"I shed a-het ter dun it, Lize, but I'd a hed ter! I won't never be tuk!"

And Beverly Latham,—his good humor restored, as he approached the squad,—strode gaily across the clearing. As he went he hummed—

No! there's nothing half so sweet in life,
As love's young dream!

little dreaming that he had been nearer to death, that bright noon, than at any moment since he ran away from the old V. M. I.

CHAPTER VIII.

WIDOWED.

AFTERNOON, once more, at Freeman Farm. The lengthening shadows of the tall cliff make twilight on the cleared space, fronting the wide porch on which Miss Jen sits, her slim brown hands lying listlessly on the coarse fabric, now neglected upon her lap. The red glow of the setting sun still steals warm up the western sky, gilding the crest of the spur; but the girl's eyes—turned full upon this evening coronet—take little note of it, to judge by the far away and absent gleam within them.

Jen Freeman has been sewing steadily on the tough cloth, all the afternoon; for, in the days of '63 Southern girls not only did their own sewing, but held themselves fortunate indeed, when they found the wherewith to sew. Not only was material too often lacking for bonnet, or gown, or other portion of apparel, but the needs of loved ones, far away from home and shelter, had well nigh exhausted every effort. Yet, the Southern women had not yet reached the thither end of their makeshift resources, when that dire struggle finally closed; and their bloodless victories over adverse circumstances should scarcely

be ranked second to those of their sires, or husbands, or sweethearts, won upon the field.

For during every day of those unmatched four years, those steadfast, tireless women wrought unceasingly for their absent loved ones. Those much-sung sisters of theirs, who gave their hair to string the war-bows, made lightest sacrifice compared to that of comfort, as well as of heart, brain and soul—offered on the altar of Trust and Faith by the daughters of the Southland.

In many a quiet nook in which the rattle of conflict never entered, heroic deeds of self-sacrifice were done; the tears that stained some coarse garment their only eulogy,—their sole record the yearning tenderness stitched into each seam, by the sore fingers of these veritable Sisters of Mercy. Each one of them,

With no one but her secret God
To know the pain that weighed upon her,
Shed holy blood as e'er the sod
Received on Freedom's field of honor!

What the homely task that Jen Freeman's fingers had plied upon matters nothing, for they had moved briskly for hours. But now they rested, anticipatory of the "blind man's holiday," while her eyes saw nothing in the space they fixed upon. For the girl was enjoying one of her rare day-dreams, its nebulous territory peopled with not unpleasant shapes, from the half smile that played about her lips from time to time. Then would come a little sigh; and a flush, seen even in the fading evening light, would

gleam through the tan upon her soft, childish cheek.

What the matter of her thought may not be pried into more properly than what she sewed upon. If it touched the novel experience of the previous night it would not be unnatural; for a handsome young lieutenant, with world-smoothed manners, a well managed voice and scars of honorable winning, was not an everyday visitor to the isolated girl. So, if fancy brought him again careering through her thoughts,—if she compared him with the rough, unlettered rustics only seen of late,—what wonder? But surely she is not in love, nor does she mistake a pleasant fancy for that state of doubtful bliss. Her healthful little body enshrines a healthful common sense; and her simple naturalness is built upon a firm basis of self respect. Jen Freeman is not the sort of girl who gives her heart before she knows full well that it is asked; or then, without sound cause to know and to value the one who asks.

Yet, she may find basis for the little sigh in the half-formed wish that farm life were not quite so monotonous; for the blush in some involuntary wish that there were more pleasant visitors, like Captain Shelby—or his lieutenant—for example. But visions of the unreal scud away, and the girl wakes to everyday reality, at the sudden note of the warder's horn; and, raising her eyes, she sees someone approaching the house through the gloaming.

The figure of this unbidden visitor is a woman, and she is met at the great gate by Farmer Freeman himself, returning from a warm and long day in the

fields. After a few words he turns toward the well-yard, and the woman slowly, and with uncertain step, approaches the gallery. And, as she draws nearer, Jen notes that she is barefoot, poorly clad, and limping with fatigue and soreness of foot. So the warm hearted girl lays down her smoothly folded work, advancing to welcome the visitor, who reaches the low gallery only to sink upon its edge with a weary sigh that is half a sob.

Looking upon the pinched features and trembling limbs with tender compassion, Jen takes the grimy hands in hers, lifting the woman, as she exclaims:

"Sit in this easy chair, you poor, tired thing! No! Don't try to talk until I get you a drink."

Then she runs to the shelf near by, that supports a huge bucket of cold, mountain well water, hurrying back with the ample gourd filled.

"Ye're smeart kind ter me, Miss Freeman," the woman said, after greedy gulping of the fluid, as she wiped her mouth on her soiled sleeve. "Mebbe yer wud n't a-ben so, ef yer'd a-knowed I war th' wife ov er disarter, wud yer?"

"Why not?" the girl responded, frankly. "I could sympathize all the more with you, for that added sorrow. But don't try to talk. You seem worn out."

"I em plum tired, sho'," the woman answered. "We 'uns hez been on ther mounting yan', a-trampin' fur two whole day. But I tho't as how you an' yer paw wud n't refuse er bite an' er sup ter a po' wumun, ef her man war er disarter."

"Of course we would n't!" Jen cried, her face glowing with sympathy and pity. "Wait a moment, and don't you stir!" she added, as she ran into the house.

The woman shook her head wearily, as she looked after her wistfully; and then her dull eye brightened into a cunning gleam, as it furtively sought the bullet hole, in the plank above her head. But soon the girl ran out, with a platter of food and a bowl of foaming, fresh milk, which she placed before the wanderer, watching her as she ate greedily and to the last crumb. Then she gave a sigh of relief, and said:

"Bless yer fur them kin' words an' fur yer pretty face, more'n fur yer grub, Miss Freeman. The're do be sum good en ther wurld, arter all!"

"I hope so," Jen said, simply. "But I believe I remember you, my good woman."

"I 'low I ben't er good 'ooman," the other answered grimly. "I 'low ez e'm po'wful baad. But Lize Holden kin do yer good, mebbe, 'fo' et's too late."

"I was right, then," Jen answered. "You are the woman whose husband was chased by the troopers, yesterday?"

"I ben't lyin' 'bout it, be I?" the woman retorted; adding with a gleam of weak triumph in her eyes: "But tha's not cotcht 'im, is tha? Tha's not got Hank yit, hez tha'? But jes' arter he foolt 'em agin, wurd war sont frum Miss Hess, 'lowin' he'd better cum yan, ef he'd git 'way. So we'uns tramt 'cross cove an' hill ter her place, all night long!"

"You must be worn out!" Jen said.

"Smeart wore out," the woman answered. "But me an' my man cum by yere jess as moon riz, and I tried ter stop an' speak yer, ter hev yer warnt."

"Last night? At moon rise?" Jen asked, quickly.

"Jess 'bout, I 'low. But th' house war dark, an' I heer'd th' critter cump'ny roostin' yan; so I hed ter git, 'thout no speech o' yer."

A gleam of light broke over Jen's face; but even sympathy could not restrain a broad smile, as she recalled the comical rencontre at that very window, the previous midnight.

"An' I hed watcht long arter yer hed quit a-singin' 'long ov yer yung man," the woman resumed; and Miss Jen's smile died suddenly, at the appropriative title.

"Where is your man now?" she asked, quietly.

"Safe an' soun', beyant," the woman replied, with a cunning gleam in her eyes. But it suddenly changed to a yearning one, as she added: "I do ble' eve I kin trus' yer, Miss Freeman. Hank 'lowed ez he wudn't jine. He jess up an' tole Miss Hess he hain't never outlaw'd yit. He jess' d'sartid ter cum ter me an' po' Johnnie; an' he's plum sot ter go back! He jess 'lows he's got *th' rite* ter go back! So, we'uns up an' tramt back, sence noon, cuttin' cross coves, an' a-dodgin' ther critter cump'ny."

"They are returning this way?" Jen asked, quickly.

"Reck'n!" was the brief reply; but the woman nodded her head and grinned knowingly. "Yer yung man 'll see yer 'fo' long, Miss!"

"You did n't come all this way, out of your road, to tell me that!" Jen retorted, sharply.

"Sho' I did n't," the woman answered, with a wary look around her. "But I plum' loss' it, tell now. Miss Freemun, them cap'ns ov ther critter cump'ny's ater my man. Tha's hard men; but yer yung man hez a kin' heart!"

Jen flushed deeply, if unconsciously; but she did not reprove the speaker. Laying no claim to the trooper, even unacknowledged, she still found his praises pleasant, though coming from such humble source. So she made no reply; and Lize Holden's cunning noting the flush, she went on:

"Well, I haint sed no harm, hez I? Then, ef yer be a fren' o' hisn, thet yung soljer—an' ther Cap'n Shelby, too, shed be warn't!"

"About Hess?" Jen queried, quickly.

"Naw! 'bout my man's paw, John Holden! Paw ar' a dang'sum man, wen he's sot; an' yestiddy he hear't as how Hank war shot by th' soljers. Then he swar his yoath ter Gawd, ez he'd shoot them two soljers. Senest he hev larnt Hank war n't shot, paw sez ez how he hain't rid o' thet yoath, 'cepen he do shoot one on 'em—"

"And *he* fired that shot last night!" Jen broke in. "The coward!"

"I hain't sed he did, hez I?" Lize Holden answered. "But paw ben't no cow'ud, sho'. He hez sware his yoath, Miss, an' he be bound ter keep't ef he kin. So yer yung man 'ud better be warn't! He hed bess' git 'way frum yere, 'fo' paw shell fin 'im!"

"You are talking nonsense, Mrs. Holden!" Jen said, angrily. "And you *must* stop speaking of Mr. Latham as my—" she hesitated a moment, then went on bravely—"as my 'young man.' I never saw him until last evening, in all my life! But you must be ignorant of a Confederate soldier's bravery, and of his duty, if you suppose he could care for the threats of a dreadful old bushwhacker like John Holden! I *will* warn Captain Shelby; but it will be to arrest this disloyal old wretch, who shoots at us out of the darkness!"

"I 'low I war doin' fur ther bes', Miss Freeman," the other replied, beginning to whimper. "But paw ar' might'ly sot again them two cap'ns. He do 'low as he can't brek his yoath; but I don' want ther yung man shot, sho'; an' I don' wan' no mo' trouble, th' Lord knows! Ef I kin git Hank ter hear reasing, he'll cum in an' gie himself up; an' Mistur Lathum 'lows he's a-friendin' 'im now. So, I don' keer ter hev Mistur Lathum hurtid, not by paw nur n'uther!"

Before Jen could frame any reply to this speech, that caused mingled emotions of pity, interest and alarm in her gentle bosom, the signal horn sounded once more.

Dusk had now fallen over the cove, but clear twilight still lingered about the crest. Through it rose a cloud of dust, seeming to move in their direction rapidly; and to Jen's keen perception—forewarned by the woman—it betokened the return of the cavalry. Suddenly, just as the dust cloud was halfway down the path, and as the dim figures of horsemen became

distinguishable through it, confusion seemed to occur in the ranks.

Three men galloped out rapidly; then a flash cut the dusk; and, simultaneously, a clear report of carbine rang among the echoing cliffs. Then all was still; the squad halted, the men sitting their horses like gray statues against the dying light. Then a single horseman left their ranks, spurring toward the house at a rapid gallop.

The farmer ran to the gate to meet him, and Jen—forgetting the woman, in her anxious fear, sudden and all absorbing now—saw that it was Captain Shelby. Then, with parted lips and quick throbbing heart, Jen waited while her father spoke briefly to the captain, the two approaching the porch on foot. The trooper's rein was looped over his left arm; and the girl noted that his manner was serious and his voice grave, as he said:

“Yes; two of your men, with pickaxe and shovel will do, Mr. Freeman. But it is a bad business, anyway.”

“You have bad news, Captain Shelby?” Jen forced herself to ask. But her usually red lips were white, and her voice dry and hard.

“Yes, quite bad news, Miss Jen,” the trooper replied. “I left Mr. Latham in charge of the squad, and came in person to ask your father's assistance.”

Jen grasped the column for support and drew a long, deep breath at these words. The color came back to her lips and cheeks; but she herself could not have explained the booming sound in her ears, which

seemed to give great distance to Shelby's voice, as he went on rapidly :

"You see, Mr. Freeman, we must push on for Fort Payne to-night. The cavalry are massing across the river, and I judge the general expects a Federal advance. A scout overtook us before sunset, with news that suggests action soon."

"But that is not the bad news you meant?" Jen asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, no; not that," Shelby answered, bluntly as he ever did, when intent on duty. "I don't mind catching deserters, Miss Jen, for that is what I was ordered to the mountains to do; but I hate to be compelled to shoot them!"

"And you have done so!" the girl cried.

"Yes; we found a desperate outlaw, worn out on the crest beyond. Resisting fiercely, he was captured and warned not to attempt escape. Just at the turn there, he broke away, and the trooper guarding him was forced to shoot."

"And killed him!" Jen again cried.

"Yes," was the blunt reply. "But it was just as well. Nothing could have saved so desperate an outlaw as Hank Holden!"

There was a dull, heavy thud upon the floor of the porch; and, recalled to sudden memory, Jen turned and bent over the stiff, cold form of the fainting woman. And her lips formed only three words:

"Hush!—His wife!"

Then, in the calm evening hush, the soldier and the farmer simultaneously bared their heads; standing silent in the presence of a great grief.

CHAPTER IX.

A MISADVENTURE.

WEEKS have passed since the deserter was sent to his final Judgment, before that of the lower court to which he was doggedly striving to "go back," nerved by the feeling that he "had the right to go."

Shelby is scouting along the river line, miles away from the scene of that not unusual tragedy, now almost forgotten in the welcomed rush of more active duty; and with him are all his command except a corporal and ten men, left with Latham. The latter has strict instructions to watch the lower shore, in case the Federal advance should cross the Tennessee river and make a raid in the direction of the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia railroad, a transportation artery so vital as to warrant closest and most watchful care. The compliment to the young cavalryman's coolness and sagacity is great, indeed, for he is pretty well beyond communication with the main body, and must rely wholly upon his own resources and military instincts; but it irks him none the less to lie out in perfect safety of the mountain fastnesses, while his comrades may at any moment be called into the hot excitement of that battle which, alas! he may only "sniff afar off."

The camp of the squad is at the intersection of two roads; one leading direct to the Tennessee river, the other the main thoroughfare of that section of the country. Their quarters are measurably comfortable,—for such season in those days,—consisting of the remains of a dilapidated log house and such brush “shelters” as the men construct; picturesque to the eye and sufficient to protect from sun and ordinary rain. Each night, after the pickets are set, the bivouac makes a quaint and novel scene; the hardy and browned fellows grouped about their fire—for it is ever cool at night in the high region—cooking what rations they have foraged for during the day, smoking their pipes and swapping rather highly-colored yarns of past adventures, mingled with frequent, and not unintelligent, speculation as to the possible movements of the foe they watch for. But that foe never appears across the river to the eager eye of the picket; and days pass in a life of the *far niente*, more or less susceptible of the prefix, *dolce*. But the men are content; sleeping and smoking away most of their days, and devoting much less time to profane objurgation as to “ther commersary,” than do their more ill-fed comrades with the main forces.

But not so with their impatient young commander. Inwardly chafing at being “stuck away in such an out of God’s sight cranny,” as he writes Shelby, in postscript to a report about nothing, Latham chafes and frets in a thick boredom, which may be felt; and, spite of active exercise and constant hunting for game he cannot find, spite of quoting poetry and even some effort to write it, comes nearer to an

attack of the blue devils than ever before in his sunny and cheerful life. His panacea for them, however, is the hope which never sleeps, that the Federal cavalry—known to be massing heavily beyond it—may cross the river in his front, and that he may be the first to meet them. But even rumors of this possibility at last die out, from reports of passing scouts and couriers; and Latham's existence now becomes one of boredom almost unbearable.

If it be verity that "an idle man's brain is the devil's workshop," it certainly is equally true that Master Cupid sometimes tarries in it, at least to watch, if not prevent, the busy labors of his coadjutor from the nether realms. So it is but natural that wandering thoughts of the young soldier often reverted to Freeman Farm, recalling pictures of its homely comfort and quiet refinement. And, central figure in all of them, of course, stood the farmer's daughter—now feeding her chicks, again preparing a savory supper; more often singing her favorite songs simply and sweetly. And more than once, as he lay under the stars—his sole companions these thoughts and his brier pipe—Latham recalled the midnight rencontre, when Miss Jen had ordered him back to bed so peremptorily.

He never failed to repeat, mentally, the remark made just before sleep that night—that he was "an ass," and that it was none of his business. But, spite of both averments, he confessed full curiosity about the strange absence of the girl from bed at such an hour; and magnified her request not to speak of it to her father into a thousand vague, but vary-

ing, shapes through the kaleidoscope of the "idle man's brain." Ignorant of the physical and staunch moral nature of mountaineers in some cases, the youth never once dreamed of the presence of another woman; and, even had the memory of Lize Holden crossed his mind, or had the grim oath of the Unionist, hanging above him like the fabled Grecian's sword, been known to him, the appearance of Miss Jen in scant costume came so pat as to make his wonder all the more natural.

But Latham had known women only to respect them, and he held for them those "High erected thoughts, seated in the heart of courtesy," which come in such connection ever, to the true gentleman. And when such a one recalls venerated mother and idolized sisters of his own, unsubstantial doubts fade from his mind, as the mountain mists dissipate at noon. So, while curious query sometimes cut his memories of the girl and her surroundings, the soldier never doubted the perfect right of Miss Jen to have gone upon her strangely-timed errand, even—as he once permitted himself to vaguely wonder—if it had been to meet some visitor, unknown to her sire.

But the one visit to Freeman Farm had left so many pleasant recollections that Latham several times thought of repeating it. Now that duty no longer seemed to call so strictly for that price of liberty which must be paid by eternal vigilance, he feels the right to a few hours recreation. This, naturally, takes the shape of an early gallop over the fifteen miles lying between him and the farm, and



"HUSH!—HIS WIFE!"—Page 108.

a return by early night, as he cannot leave his command then, even in the dead lull of hostilities about him.

So, the lieutenant in command gives himself twelve hours furlough, mounts his horse after the morning picket is posted, and rides forth to renew acquaintance with the most attractive woman he has met since leaving Virginia. But he does not start without some warning of the perils of the way; for the corporal—after receiving last and very minute instructions—still stands with hand to cap, and ventures:

“Ther’s many a d’serter and ’whacker round here yit, leftenant. Shan’t I detail ye’ an orderly?”

“Certainly not, corporal. Even if necessary, I could not spare the man,” his officer answered promptly; but his freshly shaved cheek colored deeper under its sun-bronze, at the implied necessity; and at the thought that he was not exactly riding on duty.

“All right, sir,” the man answered. “But ye’d best keep your eyes wide open, mostly in the passes with thick brush above ’em. Any o’ them skulkers ’ud pick off an officer for the glory; lett’n alone his horse an’ his pistols.”

“Thank you all the same for your warning, corporal, but ‘I wasn’t born in the woods to be scared by an owl,’” Latham laughed, in that familiarity common between officer and man in the Southern service; but he added with changed manner, as he twisted his mustache: “I don’t think many skulkers would keep near our camp, corporal, but keep sharp lookout. Order the men to forage nearer in, to-day.

It is the first I have left you in charge, and I'd hate to ride in at picket-change and find you gobbled by General Hess."

"All right, sir!" the soldier answered, stepping back, with salute. "We'll be here when you come, I guess. No skulkers are reported on the lower road by the picket, for four days past."

"They've been shy, ever since the ugly lesson taught that Holden gang," Latham answered; and with the words he trotted into the clear roadway, sitting his horse graceful and erect, the incarnation of youthful pride and hope. But the corporal—a grizzled veteran with scar-seamed cheek—shook his head sagely, as he looked after his commander, remarking half to himself:

"Splendid youngster, that, but he do have lots to larn 'bout mountain warfare, yit! Wonder where he's off to?"

"Gal, I s'pose," answered a soldier, "an' small blamet'im, arter this yere camp. Wouldn't a-minded ridin' his ord'ly, ef ther's two on 'em."

"Ye're a pretty one fur gals, ye 'air," the corporal retorted. "Better git, and forage roun' here, fur ye're fonder o' grub!"

Meanwhile the discussed superior rides gaily over the mountain road until he strikes a known trail across the country and trots into it; confident of reaching Farmer Freeman's hospitable gate long ere noon, and having ample time for a pleasant dinner and still more pleasant *tête-à-tête*. And as he goes rapidly along, the man's eyes grow dreamy with the swifter-coming fancies to his brain—the past, his

home, more recent scouting and Jen Freeman dancing along the "gray matter" in pleasantly unintelligible figures.

Suddenly he comes back to the present, and a quickly tauted rein stops his horse. A well-known mountain stream crosses the road before him, but recent rains have swelled its flood high beyond remembered bounds; and, sitting on the top of the steep descent to the familiar bridge, Latham utters something less like a prayer than an oath. For the rough planks, lately serving as bridge, are swept away, and the tumbling rush of waters above suggest small chance of ford in that direction. The banks are too steep there to offer safe descent; and turning into the woods below the bridge-point, he picks his way along the stream, that grew only narrower and deeper as he went. At last he found a point promising a ford; but the horse refused, and the spur and voice were necessary to force him in, with snort and plunge. Next instant he was swimming; but the practiced rider, wet nearly to his waist, kept the beast's head up stream until he struck bottom; then leaving the saddle and urging the tired animal up the steep and slippery bank beyond. In the dense cover of wood the rider had lost his bearings; but trifles like that seemed little to the scouter, and he quickly drew off his boots, ran the water out of them by the bucketful; and remounting, struck out for the missing trail.

Half an hour later, Beverly Latham drew rein, dead beat. Disgusting him as did the confession come, it had to come. He was lost in the woods; and,

human intelligence lacking, he must trust to brute instinct. Giving the horse his head, the man urged him on, and the intelligent animal turned short round and began picking his way slowly through the brush, in direction exactly opposite.

Lieutenant Latham's boots were perfectly dry and hunger began to gnaw him equally with disgust, when he struck a narrow trail two hours later. Still letting his horse have his head, but touching him with the spur, he trotted briskly on. But this road—circuitous and narrow as it was—seemed the only hope, and at last the disgusted man emerged into a broader path, though still unknown to him. But the sun was already hastening toward the west, far past meridian. Impatiently the rider urged his steed, for an hour longer riding as near due south as the curves of road permitted. Then came a sudden break in the horse's stride; a sudden halt, followed by a limping effort to gather again.

That the merciful man is ever merciful to his beast, is proverbial; but, in those days and in such a country, mercy was largely reinforced by necessities of personal safety. Dismounting and examining the foreleg, promptly raised to his touch, Latham found that the horse had picked up a jagged stone, fast imbedded 'twixt shoe and frog. With his knife he carefully tried the stone, finally using more force and snapping the worn, rusty shoe that had done so much rough mountain service. The farrier's knife he carried removed the fragment; but the rust-fastened nails held firmly to the other, and the horse winced and trembled under handling, showing a bad bruise

of the frog. So with another glance at the sun,—now less like Joshua's to him than ever,—the man strode ahead, pocketing his knife and followed by the limping beast.

It is perhaps fortunate that Beverly Latham did not have the habit of talking to himself; for his words on this occasion might have shocked any listener—had one been possible in that deserted spot—who was in the least acquainted with the church service. But he kept silent for perhaps a mile. Then the horse nickered, pricked up his ears and turned toward the wood, stepping more easily and seeming free from pain. Grasping the bit, the soldier paused and listened for the expected neigh in answer; for the brute evidently recognized some equine friend. But no neigh came; only what seemed, to the ear of the practiced scout, the snap of broken branches and the swish of leaves swept aside. The horse heard, too; for, raising his head, he neighed clear and loud, pricking his ears for answer. None came; and the master, mounting and rising in his stirrups, peered long and eagerly through the trees, for some sign of life. None rewarded his searching gaze; and with deeper disgust than before, he once more gave the horse his head, not omitting keen watch toward the suspicious sounds, as he carefully inspected his pistol-chamber, to see if his bath had affected the caps.

Then, after what seemed to him endless delay, the soldier's heart bounded with joy. The horse moved out of the skirt of woods into the very road he had left at the broken bridge, but far below it. But now

the sun hung low over the western mountain tops, and a ten mile ride on a lamed horse, lay between him and Farmer Freeman's. Should he turn back? It would be night before he could reach his camp, even could he retrace, in the dusky woods, the path around which his horse had brought him out. Besides, the worn beast might not again swim the swollen creek; and, really there was no pressing military need for his presence in camp. His situation was most unfortunate, but, in best judgment, the safest way out of it was the way to Freeman Farm; and, inclination siding with judgment, the decision was carried, *nem. con.* Latham rode slowly southward, the evening closing around him rapidly, and night falling before he had covered half the distance.

As he passed slowly along, Latham's ears were all at once saluted by the sounds of a fiddle. The tones of this master instrument, if not respondent now to the touch of the master hand, were not the less welcome to the wayfarer. For they denoted human habitation and possible care for his lame horse; and the latter also pricked up his ears, as though to prove that the story of Orpheus and his lyre was not founded wholly on fable.

Staring eagerly ahead, the soldier saw a dim light on the wayside; and riding toward it, soon found himself before a rough log cabin, from which proceeded the melody of "Old Molly Hare," accompanied by sounds of heavy feet indulging in the double shuffle. So vigorous was the sacrifice to Terpsichore as fairly to shake the frail building.

"Yer hain't goin' ter pass 'thout 'lightin', be yer,

stranger?" cried a rough voice from the doorway, and Latham saw that it proceeded from a burly stripling of perhaps sixteen years old. "Yer can't git no music fur th' yarmy yere," the boy added, with a stare and a grin half malicious and half admiring. "An' yer can't git no cornscreeps, nuther, fur we'uns be all yunder age, sho'. But yer kin have a pow'ful good time, by hither, if yer'll 'light an' jine!"

The soldier hesitated a moment, doubting the prudence of trusting himself among strangers holding revel in this wild spot. But he and his horse were both woefully in need of a brief rest, and it flashed into his mind that duty might warrant inspection of the place. If there were no grown skulkers, or deserters, in the house, a hint dropped by some of the youths, or women—under intoxicating influence of the dance, if not of more direct stimulant—might be useful for future reference. And, perhaps not least, curiosity impelled him to view the novel scene. So he answered cheerily:

"My horse is dead lame, stranger, so I will 'light and rest him awhile, if I do n't intrude."

"It ben't like I'd er axed yer, ef yer'd 'trude, stranger, be't?" the boy answered. "Ef yer do be a Johnnie, it do n't mek no differ."

So Latham hitched his steed convenient to the door, loosened his pistol in holster, and, giving a farewell rubbing to the lame leg, followed his host into the cabin.

The scene striking his gaze—albeit far different from a "commencement hop," or a Richmond ball room—was still a lively and novel one. Up and down the rough puncheon floor—formed of logs partly

smoothed on top—were ranged two rows of sturdy, frowsy mountain girls, few of them fairly respectable looking, and almost every one awkward, unkempt and barefoot. But their freckled faces glowed with pleasure and perspiration; for they had evidently been dancing some sort of Virginia reel, with the few—and seemingly much sought—striplings among them.

And now, as a tough old sinner of a fiddler scraped his vile instrument faster, those girls who had partners, were fiercely striving to dance down their beaux. Fast and furious raged the revel; more moist streamed the faces of the dancers; and the girls jumped so high, in their eager rivalry, that the fact was soon revealed to the intruder that shoes and stockings were not the only missing garments. But a few minutes of such exercise sufficed to end the dance, the winning couple received rude congratulations; and then Latham's guide introduced him with the frank remark:

“Look yere, gals an’ fellers! I hev axt this yer’ Johnnie ter hitch his critter an’ jine.—He hev hitched and yere he ar’!”

The introduction seemed ample; for the stranger was promptly surrounded by the whole gaping assembly; and the seeming belles of the ball pressed closer and urged him “ter jine.”

But, pleading fatigue and possibility of stopping only brief space, he sat down by the old fiddler. That descendant of Orpheus scraped his bow promptly again; and the heavy tread of the revelers again shook the cabin.*

*Literally accurate description of an actual scene.

Standing a little way back from the road, the log hut was seated on the crest of a gentle rise; while the thick growth of tree and brush, had been cleared away only from its front and partly at its sides. Behind it the thicket was dense and dark as "the forest primeval"; its gloom enhanced even, by the vague flicker of light that streamed through the open door, toward the road, and filtered, thin-streaked, between the logs, barely touching the leaves and boughs.

From the thicket comes the chirp of insects, almost drowned by squeak of string and beat of foot. But is that a rustle among the brush? It might be a rabbit, changing its lair; or a snake, stealing away from unwonted noise. But the rustle is repeated; the boughs seem to part; and the dimly traced shadow of the woods seems to lengthen out, projected toward the cabin. Gradually the dark, thin line steals onward, nearer to the house; and now, as a pale flicker strikes it, the shadow rises and becomes a man. And the man has fell purpose in his heart, for he skulks onward, stooping and noiseless; and he trails a long rifle by his side. Now he reaches the back of the cabin, rises to his full height and peers eagerly through one of the chinks, between ill-fitting logs. And as the fitful gleam touches his face, the features show drawn and set, with fury, hate and deadly menace.

Silently as a spirit, the man raises the rifle, places the muzzle in the crack and takes deliberate aim at something within. But another shadow—slim, gliding and noiseless as his own—has followed swift

upon it; and, just as his relentless finger presses on the trigger, a lean but strong hand strikes the butt of the rifle from his shoulder.

The crack of the rifle—the flash into their midst—hold the dancers paralyzed in mid-motion. The fiddle stops, echoless; and for an instant all is deadly still. But only for an instant. The next, all turn intuitively to the soldier guest, whose trick they deem it. A rush is made for Latham, at the very moment that he reels from his seat, sinking to the floor in a pool of his own blood!

The would-be murderer fled from the crack toward the covering woods. And following swift—and close as Nemesis—fled the companion shadow, through bush and brier and brush. Turning at last the man faced his pursuer; speaking slowly, deliberately, but without anger—only desperate fixity of purpose in his tone:

“Wy hez yer dun it, Lize? How hez yer dar’d ter cum ’twixt me an’ my yoath?”

“Oh, paw!” sobbed the woman. “Yer hed n’t th’ rite ter do’t! It war n’t him ez kilt my man! He war a-friendin’ Hank, all ’long!”

“Tha’s vipers all!” John Holden answered, coldly. “Gawd hez hearn my yoath, gell; an’ He’ll not ge’en hit bac’ ter me! Yer may hev save’ ther hunter, this wunst—tho’ I do hope sholy not; but, ef he ben’t dead—thet meks no differ, gell! His tim’ hez got ter cum—an’ cum et shell!”

“Oh! yer shan’t, paw! Yer shan’t go addin’ ov murder, top murder! Gawd knows I luv’d my man, paw! But He knows, too, as th’ yung ’un war

a-friendin' Hank, 'long of me! Let'a be, paw! Ef yer mus kill, fur thet yoath—then, paw, I'd a-ruther yer'd kill me!"

The woman passed before him in the gloom throwing wide her thin arms, and facing him in the path.

"I hed thet en my min', Lize, wen yer streck my gun," the old man answered without one show of emotion; his voice hard and cold as though repeating a lesson. "Et cum ter me then, gell. But wot good 'ud come o' thet? It war agin them, as I hev swar my yoath!"

Within the cabin confusion and terror soon subsided. Those wild people—accustomed to blood and fracas at all times—were hardened now, by trial and constant danger. Boys ran out and beat the brush, swinging rude lanterns and calling to each other; but soon they ceased the bootless search.

The girls had lifted Latham and torn open his bloody jacket. Now one of them plugged a small, bleeding wound, with fragments of his handkerchief. For the bullet, meant for his heart, had been deflected upward by Lize Holden's blow, and a deep flesh wound in his shoulder was the result of its speeding.

Soon rough but kindly hands had borne "ther Johnnie" outside, had lifted him to his horse, and now steadied him in saddle, as others grasped the bit.

"War tu?" asked a kindly voice. "Wich way ter go, soljer?"

And Latham—faint, dizzy and reeling in his seat—answered mechanically, as his head sunk on his breast:

"Farmer—Freeman's!"

CHAPTER X.

CONVALESCENT SYMPTOMS.

"It is a lovely face; so full of brightness and gentleness. I would have known your sister Stella was a musician, without your telling me, Mr. Latham. Your mother is a grand woman, too, I can see; and Miss Stella is like her. But, isn't your mother just a little—proud?"

Jen Freeman spoke with the frank gentleness natural to her, and the added freedom of ripened acquaintance. But she hesitated an instant before her last word; and with it the double locket rested on her lap; and her eyes—not seeking those of the young lieutenant, to whom she spoke—gazed out over the north crest absently, and her lips parted in a half sigh.

"Well, perhaps—just a little," Latham answered easily. "Not more so, though, than her lineage and life-long surroundings might warrant. But mother has no false or foolish pride about anything, Miss Jen,—except about her children, especially her runaway boy."

"*That* is very natural," Jen said, in her simple candor, but still staring across the mountain.

The lieutenant stared at her earnestly; and a gratified flush stole into his cheek, as his rather thin hand went to his mustache mechanically, in habitual caress of its well-tended ends. He was lounging idly in a huge rush bottomed chair, looking rather pale and thin, but what a town girl had called "interesting." But he seemed scarcely an invalid now; and the bridle arm he carried in a blue ribbon, rested on it lightly and as mere matter of form, apparently.

Great had been the excitement at Freeman Farm, on that midnight three weeks previous, when his rough guides led up Latham's lamed horse, bearing the wounded rider. The farmer had first despatched Master Willie to the Gadsden doctor, mounted on his fleetest horse and enjoined to ride and spare not. Then he had showered maledictions—not wholly unprofane and condensed into strength by repression—on the "cowardly skunks," who had bushwhacked his pale and bleeding guest. And Miss Jen, meantime, had moved about, swift and noiseless as a sprite, preparing the best room for instant tenancy; and stripping long-prized linen rags into bandages.

Pale and white-lipped as the girl was, her hand never shook, nor did any useless moisture rise to the brown eyes, as she helped remove the blood-soaked jacket tenderly, and washed the blood clots from the long, gashed puncture of the bullet. But those eyes held eager query—so intense as to be painful; and her father answered to them:

"No; it's not dangerous—no artery cut; ball seems to have cut out. Cold water'll do till Preston gets here. He's only faint from loss of blood."

"It's nothing—only scratch—Miss Jen," Latham had muttered, opening his eyes on the girl, only to close them wearily at once. But Dr. Preston had verified the farmer's diagnosis; the weakness of depletion swiftly passed away; and the handsome young object of interest was soon on his feet, disabled, but fast recovering under combined action of close care and a fine constitution.

Pleasant days had proved those of convalescence. The thunder of war had rolled far away, northward and eastward; Shelby had ridden down to see his sub, reassuring him by his growl that he was "growing sick for a brush," and that everything was "dead as a mackerel." Preston had ceased his visits, save a social one for a smoke and a game of cribbage as he passed; and Latham had taught the mysteries of "fifteen two, and one for his Nob," to his gentle and tireless nurse. Then, as he had grown stronger, books and music occupied them much; Jen sitting for hours plying most contentedly her swift needle, as the youth lay on the wide settee propped by pillows, and read romance, essay and poem, not unskillfully. Then, when the sun went down and the cliff deepened the gloaming, the yellow-toothed old upright fairly rattled with musical laughter; and songs—with some duets he had taught her—occupied the time of the girl and the soldier, if not wholly the thoughts of both.

For—sewing briskly, darning, or even kneading simple dough, or mixing promising egg-batter in the room near by, as the patient talked, or read—Jen Freeman's mind was actively at work. First she

wondered much at the strange coming into her quiet life, of this man so different from,—yes, so superior to,—any she had met before. But, womanlike she yielded to those twin influences, Propinquity and Chance; and now, that wonder becoming matter of course, she began to grow restive under her own cross-examination; albeit none the less involuntary than it was vigorous. Nor had she confined it to herself alone; for, with tact and delicacy,—but with absorbing curiosity,—she had led the young man to much talk of his home and of himself. Stella, his favorite sister and senior by two years, Jen Freeman felt was already a known and liked personality; and the word-portrait of the stately, dignified grand-dame—tracing her descent back far beyond Jamestown, and careless whether the sun rose far beyond Virginia and went to rest distant from her western slopes or not—was perhaps more clearly visible, through the boy's loving and prideful chatter, than she was in the miniature at which the girl so often gazed.

And though no whit a fop, as has been said, Bev. Latham still held good opinion of himself and of his own; result, most largely of decided spoiling at home, and next of its continuance at school, and in so much of society as he had seen, under influence of his frank, genial manhood and bright mentality. So the lonely girl knew by rote the salient events of his life; his school escapades, terminating with the truant trip to follow the drum; his "hair breadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach"—modestly told as these were, with no suspicion of vaunt; his

first wound; and over and again, his "leading" of that Asian mystery to her, "the German," amid scenes of but half-comprehended brilliance and delight.

Often, as the glib narrator rattled over these themes,—perhaps more intent upon their memory than suspicious of their effect,—Jen Freeman's swiftly-moving fingers would rest a moment in her lap; the brown eyes would gaze intently into nothingness, growing deeper and more meaning. Then—without a start, but always with a half sigh—the girl would wake from the day-dream of an instant, the fingers seeming bent on more than making up lost time, and the eyes bent steadily upon the fingers. But—questioned on oath, before a jury of her peers—the mountain maiden had surely perjured herself, had she attempted plain formulation of the matter of her furtive thought at such moment.

Propinquity and Chance had doubtless begun their usual work, but its finish was barred by the sound common sense habitant in the sound brain and body of the self-respecting woman; and while her mind was ever full of her ever-present guest, there came to her ever, likewise, sage and saving reflection. And these, the portraits and his frank talk of places and of people wholly strange, largely aided for her safety. His people and his surroundings were so different from hers; luxury, refinement and higher cultivation, in place of homely comfort and sterling, self-respecting honesty. So Jen Freeman had committed no perjury—responding to that hinted cross-examining "jury of her peers"—

had she boldly and simply stated she was not in love with Mr. Latham, and that she surely never would be! Did she like him? Surely, yes; so frank, honest and brave, yet so considerate and gentle withal. More than any man she had met before? Well, yes; and naturally, too, for he was of a different mould, as well as of a different world, from theirs—and hers. Would she miss him when he rode to the wars again? Wofully, beyond a doubt; for the companionship had been very interesting, quite improving and very—sweet to her. The days would not glide so swiftly; the evenings with dear old papa would seem a trifle prosy at first; the well known paths about the mountain would be lonelier then—would lack a something scarce describable. Then the accustomed old life would settle back naturally once more, and a pleasant memory would be all the result left by this—episode.

Much this had been the girl's answer to her jury; and an honest answer, too. Such was the frequent answer to the silent questioning of that best Mentor, which had borne her safely so far on her unaided path of life—her pure conscience. And satisfying that, Jen Freeman might well have satisfied Mrs. Grundy and “her army with banners” of hint and innuendo; had, indeed, the name of that ubiquitous feminine free lance yet penetrated the pure echoes of Sand Mountain.

What the man felt, as the weeks sped on, he himself never stopped to analyze. That they were speeding pleasantly was all he recked, save perhaps that they sped a trifle too fast. Young, ardent and not

wholly unspoiled as he was, to gather him roses while he might, had ever been Bev. Latham's philosophic habit. And, now that time was so swiftly flying, he never stopped to question the result of their plucking. Thorns there would be in plenty soon, when he got back to camp dreariness and campfire; so the ever-indulged hand went out greedily for the gathering, taking care of the petals, but leaving the thorns to take care of themselves. Did he love the girl? Asked this question before the jury, the man had truly sworn that he had never yet asked it of himself! Admire her piquant face and almost perfect figure he surely did; more still her loyal, steadfast honesty of purpose and of speech, her bright intelligent naturalness, that had made her attractive as she was, spite of circumstance and surrounding. But deeper than this, the mental probe had not gone into the spirit; and the probing process being a bore, and Bev. hating boredom in its every form, he had tossed aside the useful, if sometimes painful, instrument, reliant upon Nature to effect a cure of any wound of her own making.

Bev. Latham had never been really in love, as far as he understood that phrase and himself. At nineteen he had been "engaged" to a brunette beauty, who had accepted the offer of a trip to Europe should she give up her girlish folly; but who had forgotten to return his handsome solitaire, and many another "token." But—to his shame, possibly—the man had forgotten her, too; so they were quits, he would have reasoned, had he remembered.

And as for Jen Freeman, she never once even wondered at his feeling for her. Panoplied in the purity of her womanhood,—safely intrenched behind her proper self-respect,—she could well await the possible shock of that onset, which intuition whispers to most female hearts must come, ere the battle of life be fully joined! But faintest hint even, to herself, that this man placed her in his heart above another, had shocked the girl's innate delicacy; and so the slight tumult in her bosom was wholly introspective when it came, challenging her own feelings, perhaps, but his—never!

“What makes you think mother proud, Miss Jen,” Latham queried, taking up her question again, and fixing his eyes steadily upon her. “I am sure her letter, thanking you all, did not suggest it.”

“It was a lovely—dear letter,” the girl answered simply. “And so was your sister's; but they both said so much more than we deserved. I'm sure, Mr. Latham, papa and I would have done quite as much for anybody!”

“For *anybody*?” He echoed her words with some feeling in the tone, but certainly with some surprise; and his cheek flushed under some strong emotion.

“For anyone who wears the gray,” Jen corrected herself, quietly, “and who was wounded fighting for us. You knew I meant that.”

“Yes, I fear I did,” he answered, never dropping his eyes, now fixed so eagerly on hers that they fell once more upon her busy fingers.

There was a little pause, which she broke:

"But my question was a rude one, for it interrupted your reading. Go on, please—if you are not tired."

"I am not tired," he answered, promptly; but he closed the book with a snap, laying it on his knee. "But first I want to ask you something. Will you answer me frankly?"

"Yes,—if I can." She hesitated almost imperceptibly, but her voice was very quiet.

"And I know you can," he went on hastily. "Am I just the same to you, as—'anybody'? When I leave you this week and ride away again, will you have no memory of me but as a passing acquaintance? Will you forget me as you would—anybody?"

"Why, certainly not!" the girl began, with a frank smile, as she flashed one glance of her great, brown eyes into his. But something she saw there—scarce comprehended—dropped hers quickly; and she added, more reservedly: "For we are—friends, Mr. Latham. We have both said so, and *I* meant it. I do not give my friendship lightly, and I do not forget my friends."

"Thank you for that, you dear, honest girl!" he cried eagerly, "even if that be—all!"

She made no reply; to her there seemed none to make; but, after a moment, he blurted out:

"What *is* friendship?"

To that abtruse proposition, which has puzzled the sages from the days of David down through those of Damon and Dean Swift,—even to those nearer ones of George Eliot and Freda Ward,—the

clear head and pure heart of the mountain girl simply answered :

“The feeling of two people who respect each other and are congenial.”

“No; but I mean personally,” he retorted eagerly and a trifle petulantly. “Do *you* believe it can exist between—a—man and a woman?”

“Why, Mr. Latham!” Again the brown eyes raised to his, no fear, but some wonder in them. “I have said I was your friend. Of course I believe so!”

“But, I mean always? Can it remain constant—unchanged—and be *only* friendship? The poet was right:—

‘Oh! call it by some other name,
For Friendship is too cold;
And Love is now an earthly flame,
Whose shrine must be of gold!’

You *must* know that is true!”

Jen Freeman’s lips formed a half-smile; but something her eyes caught, coming into the man’s as he spoke, froze it on them, and she grew paler as she looked at him. On the dark mountain path, she had often noted how clear and plain showed every minute object in the brief flash of the lightning. And now, she felt she had been treading blindly, selfishly along an unknown road; standing at last on the very verge of the precipice, revealed by the sudden gleam. For Jen Freeman, simple and guileless as she was, read the full meaning of the man’s glance; and, boyish as was his speech, and fustian as it had seemed to the young worldling of a dozen ballrooms, to the mountain

maiden, it was—revelation! Her own eyes fell and her hands dropped limp in her lap; but she uttered no word, only grew paler and more grave as the man went on vehemently:

“You cannot misunderstand me! You must know that I cannot go away merely as your ‘friend’! You must understand that no man could be thrown with you, as I have been, and not feel the influence of your gentle, noble nature—of a heart and soul that are peerless among all the women I have ever known!”

The girl never moved; but the little frill upon her bosom rose and fell, as an anchored skiff upon a wind-swept surf; and a flood of crimson dyed her cheeks, as she found voice to cry:

“Oh! stop! you *must* not!”

“*Why* must I not? I am not ashamed—no, not afraid—to say it!” the youth cried. “Why should I not believe you the noblest—best—dearest woman I have met in all my life? Why should I be aught but proud, to tell you—*I love you?*”

It must be recalled that Beverly Latham had scarce passed his majority; that the girl was still his junior, by at least two years; and that no man had yet spoken to her the words her city sisters hear so often and so early. So, when his hand gently prisoned hers, and held it in a strong and ardent clasp, small wonder is it that the slim, brown fingers trembled; that the little frill heaved and tossed, as though the storm within were dangerous!

But—softly and not ungently—the little hand slipped from his clasp; and, while the burning flush

still stood upon her cheek, the voice trembled that exclaimed:

"Oh, hush! It is wrong—mean, of you!"

"Why is it wrong? How is it mean?" the boy asked, impetuously. "I have loved you, almost ever since that first night! I have thought of you upon the march—on picket! And since your gentle, precious tending of me here—oh, Jen, you *must* have known—you *must* have seen—"

"Stop, Mr. Latham! You *must*!" The red disc still glowed on either cheek, and the lips that formed her brief words trembled. But not one shadow of fear—far less of triumph—dimmed the brave, honest glance of the eyes that Jen Freeman raised to his. "*Had* I known—had I seen—or even suspected—anything of this, I should have been lacking in honesty—in self-respect, to have been as frank and friendly as I have!"

"But you *do* believe me, Jen? You know I speak from my heart?" he insisted.

Again her eyes fell; again her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Twice the half-formed phrase halted at the threshold of speech ere she could reply:

"Yes, I believe! I fear it is true!"

He rose above her; standing before her with outstretched hands, as he pled:

"And, believing, you will give me no hope—no answer?"

"How can I?" she said low, her head bowed.

"Tell me I may hope!" he went on impetuously.

"Tell me that you care for no one else; that some

day—knowing me better and finding me not all unworthy—you *may* care for me! Tell me that you do not feel to me as to—‘*anybody*!’”

And again the woman—still with bowed head, but heart in too great tumult even for question—answered low:

“How can I?”

“What! There is another?” he cried, hotly. “I have come too late? It was to meet him—”

He paused abruptly, the wonder in the eyes the girl lifted to him cutting off speech. But she rose, too; quietly, gravely and facing him, with hands lightly crossed before her. Then she spoke quietly and sadly, stopping him by a gesture—or an inflection—when he would have interrupted:

“I do not understand. There is no ‘other.’ You are the first who has ever spoken so to me—God forgive me! if through any fault of mine. But I cannot let your fancy carry you away like this; for—almost strangers as we are—I respect you—I like you—too well!”

“Then you do not despise me!” he cried, again seizing her hands in a clasp that resisted her woman’s strength. “You at least—respect—like me?”

“I do; beyond anyone I have known,” the girl answered bravely, ceasing the bootless struggle to free her hands. “You are so gentle, so brave, so much above me in many ways. I honor you, and prize your friendship, more than I can say.”

“And—there is no one else?” he pleaded, almost piteously. “You will let me hope?”

Her eyes fell once more. Again the simple little frill fluttered and shook, as though the wind swayed it; and, spite of her struggle, the voice trembled that answered:

"I must not say so. There *is* no other, but I *cannot* say so!" There was little of the meekness of Ruth, in the simple mountain girl; and, with a deep breath, she went on more calmly: "Let go my hands, please! Oh! Mr. Latham, we are *so* different; our people are so different! You are highborn and polished; I am humble and simple. This is a fancy." She shook her head sadly, but half smiled, as she raised her free hands in deprecation. "No; I believe you mean it—*now*! I respect you too much to doubt that you—*believe* you feel it all. But, now, you are weak—away from friends; and perhaps—" she paused an instant, then went bravely on—"your gratitude mistakes. Think how different I am—from women you have known — from *them*!"

She held out the locket with faces of his mother and sister, that had not left her hands. And the straightforward honesty of the simple girl went home, as the worldling's tact had never done. Almost mechanically he took the locket; turning abruptly from her and striding to the other end of the porch.

For an instant, Jen Freeman watched him with parted lips and heaving bosom; the color dropping out of her cheeks, till they grew deadly white. One instant her hand pressed close above her heart. Then, quietly, demurely she took her seat again, her nimble fingers flashing the needle through her work.

And soon Latham turned and came toward her, quiet, gentle and with something in his face she had not seen before.

“Jen, you will forgive me?” he said, gravely but tenderly. “I was selfish—careless of you, dear, to speak as I did. But love is ever selfish, little girl, and I *do* love you; not as you fear, for to-day, but for to-morrow and forever! No, dear, do not stop me now. I will not weary you by repeating it. But, Jen, I think I know your heart; I *trust* you with the bigot’s trust in his faith. *You* will not tell me that I may; but—as there is no other—I *will* hope! I *will* believe that some day, when the South is free—when we are both free to think of more than duty—when you have seen *them*, and learned that they are *not* ‘so different’—then you may question your own heart and find mine not all unworthy of it.”

As he spoke, the girl sat still and silent, letting no sign betray what feeling swayed her as she listened. But her head bowed lower under its red-brown coronet of hair; and as he ceased it drooped, and the face was hidden by her hands. The man gave a great start, half reaching out his own, to grasp them; but he paused, shaking his head sadly, as he stooped and raised the fallen volume of Longfellow. Mechanically he opened it and glanced upon the page; the girl still silent, motionless. Then he spoke softly, with a sad quiet in his words:

“You have my pledge, Jen. Until we part—so soon now!—I will embarrass you no more, dear little one, by such words. You forgive my selfishness, I know;

for, Jen, I *could not* help speaking—I felt so keenly this,” and in low, but steady voice he read:

‘For there are moments in life, when the heart is so full of
emotion,
That if by chance it be shaken, or into its depths, like a
pebble,
Drops some careless word—it overflows, and its secret,
Spilt on the ground, like water, may never be gathered
together!’”

He closed the book, took her hands gently; and, bending down, pressed his lips upon them with a tenderness that was a benediction. Next moment he turned and strode away into the grounds; moving rapidly and never looking back.

Jen Freeman sat still and pale, her hands plying her needle mechanically, her eyes fixed upon something straight before her, but seen of them only. Suddenly she rose, moved swiftly to her own room, locking the door behind her. Then, the usually calm girl threw herself upon her bed, shivering a moment and burying her face in the pillow. Then she lay still as though a sculptured form upon a tomb; but the pure heart was pouring out an earnest prayer for light at the foot of the Throne!

CHAPTER XI.

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY.

A DULL, heavy cloud hung low over the north crest an hour after sunrise, and Farmer Freeman studied it from the gallery with the eye of an expert. In the window Latham leaned languidly, and a trifle paler than his wont; but his closely buttoned jacket and trim belt showed that he was ready for duty, and that the pallor came perhaps from mental, rather than from bodily weakness. And his wandering eyes, roving over each familiar object in the room, from the prim old mirror—narrow, in tarnished gilt frame and standing from the wall at an angle of forty-five stiff degrees—to the highly colored prints of the battles in Mexico, where reckless Charley May careered and Captain Bragg—of greater and more familiar fame, near by—gave them “a little more grape,” studied each detail.

With a slight rustle of drapery, Latham turned and the lately wandering eyes fixed upon Jen Freeman, as she came from the dining room. She was quiet, simple and unconscious, as always, looking fresh and pretty in her plain white dress, neat little apron and with the bands of glossy hair simply knotted low on her neck. There was a gravity in her

eyes, and less brightness in her smile, perhaps, as she advanced and held out her hand in good-morning to her guest; for he was to leave after breakfast and ride away to—what none might guess. But there was not one shade of reserve or of consciousness in her manner; for Latham had kept faith loyally. In the days intervening since his abrupt confession, he had gone back to the old life, talking, reading and singing with the girl, as though no break had come. Sometimes, especially in mountain rambles, he had grown absent awhile, and his voice had taken tenderer cadence; but he had kept his word like a gentleman and had spoken no hint of love, or even of admiration. But he talked more of his home and his people, of his past gay life, and told Jen the full story of his boyish engagement, simply and without reserve; for he seemed to wish that her memory of him should be photographic in fidelity, holding the blemishes as well as the better points of his career.

And the girl had listened and talked as before. Sometimes—when he dwelt upon the grandeur of his mother's ideas, or described a peculiarly brilliant scene of society—a dull, vague longing would creep into the well-balanced brain; but ever to fade before she analyzed, or even recognized, it. And, when he told the story of his flying *fiancée* and missing ring, Jen's clear laugh had answered the rueful tale, even before she cried, in pretty disdain:

“How little and mean of her! I congratulate you, Mr. Latham, on your escape—in time. Such a girl could *never* have grown worthy of you—and of yours!”

So the days had passed, swiftly, still and painlessly; and now the parting was at hand—uncertain ever in the war days, and more so now as rumors came of general movement along Bragg's front.

"It is needless to speak my regrets at going," the man said gravely, but releasing the little hand after a not too warm pressure. "Things are so uncertain; and there is no telling how long it may be before I again see my—friend."

"I hope, and I believe we shall meet again," the girl answered gently, but her eyes did not meet his. They rested absently on a stiff-haired portrait of Andrew Jackson on the wall beyond; then seemed to study intently the framed copy of the "Declaration of Independence," almost as sacred to the democrats of the old South as were the Tables of Stone to the Hebrew of old.

"And I hope you will not stay here always," Latham said absently, as though thinking aloud. "Lovely as is your home, and strangely as you have developed in it, you are really too far superior to your surroundings to be buried in this out-of-the-world nook."

"It is my home, and I have never longed for the world," she answered simply; but she half sighed as her eyes left the Declaration and rested on the music they had sung the night before. "I never wish to leave papa. He is all that I have in the world; and, though he urges me often, I will not accept auntie's offer to go to Wilmington—even to Europe, on a blockade-runner, if I wish."

"I am glad of that!" the man blurted out.

"Why?" she asked, simply. "Surely, from what you have told me of it, seeing your world would improve a country girl like me."

"I would not see you improved, if it meant any change of your pure, true nature," he answered, more earnestly. "It was these that taught me to—to be your—friend!"

He ended abruptly, and with a vivid blush. The cynic need not sneer; for in that year of grace, A. D. 1863, there were still left in the South a few young men, who could blush on proper occasion. *Eheu, tempora! Eheu, mores!* The species has grown almost as extinct as the Dodo; and now when the blush does exist, it sometimes mantles tenderly on the tip of the nose! But this particular Dodo pulled himself together promptly, covering his confusion with the commonplace:

"But this war cannot last forever; and then you may care more to see something of society."

"I should not wish to wait till then, to see something of my friends," Jen said, frankly.

"Surely not!" he answered, appropriating her thought. "We will meet again, Miss Jen, I feel sure. Did I not, I should be—"

What that young lieutenant of cavalry imagined he might become, during protracted absence from his companion, must take its place in that limbo of unperformed deeds and of unspoken speeches, which Ariosto declares to exist in the moon. For the farmer turned and strode toward the window, saying:

"Look here, leftenant, these clouds look dangerous; and a wetting won't help a fresh convalescent. Better stay over till to-morrow."

Good soldier as Latham was, his heart bounded strangely at the blunt words, and his eyes went straight to Jen's, with something of the drowning man's hope in clutching at the straw. But her eyes were turned to her father's, and she only said, very gravely and demurely:

"Why, papa! Mr. Latham has orders, and the rumors say the enemy is moving. Even I would not ask him—" a little blush came to her cheek as she paused; but she looked calmly at the discussed soldier, finishing a little hastily—"even to delay his breakfast longer. It will be cold; let us go in."

"Thank you, very much!" Latham said to the girl; but whether to her invitation, or to her implied willingness to have him go, was left obscure. And he added to the farmer, but looking at her, as he promptly fell into line for the breakfast-room: "Miss Jen is right. I have already wasted too much time—uselessly. The best thing I can do now is to get back to active duty and find something better to do!"

"Well, you know best; but you needn't be fretting for fighting. I reckon this war will last long enough to let all of you have a stomach full of fighting, if empty of everything else. Try that piece of chicken. Jen growed him!"

But even farewell breakfasts will not last forever, and somehow at this one the soldier's unfailing appetite did not report for duty. It was not a cheery



"CURSID BE YER!"—Page 151.

meal, Jen's mind seeming bent on household cares and hospitable duty, and the guest replying somewhat at random to Mr. Freeman's talk on politics and his views of the war. So, it was with absolute sense of relief that Latham found himself outside the porch, his horse ready and the small baggage-roll strapped to the saddle.

The warm, strong grasp of the farmer had released his hand, after hearty Godspeed and urgent request to ride down whenever in distance, and the guest turned a pale, grave face to Jen. She had put on her sunbonnet and held her pail of dampened meal; and her face, too, was grave, but gentle and not pale.

"My little family must be hungry and wondering," she said, with a transient smile. "I will walk with you as far as the knoll."

He looped the bridle over his arm and they moved away in silence, broken only by commonplaces about the coming storm. But Jen passed the knoll, forgetful of her little family and their hungering, walking on toward the gate.

There Latham paused, looking yearningly at the downcast face of the girl, gentle but very grave in the sunless daylight. But he was still silent, though his face spoke plainly of deep feeling. And yet—with that incomprehensible working of the mind, which takes cognizance often of veriest trifles in the very crises of life—he noted the tan upon her cheek and the splash of freckles over her piquant nose. Suddenly he thrust his hand into his jacket, holding out the locket:

"Mother and Stella know you so well," he said, with a forced smile, "that I would have you say good-bye to them, too."

She extended her browned hand—now less white than his rest-bleached one—and took the miniatures; looking long and gravely at them. Then she returned them with a little sigh, as she said: "Farewells are so uncertain, in these days, Mr. Latham, that I hate to speak them. I, too, feel almost as if I knew your mother and—Stella. But, gracious! How carelessly you carry that locket! You should fasten it in your pocket."

"I have never thought I could lose it; but you are right. How can I secure it?" he answered.

"Very simply. Pin it to the lining," she said. Impulsively she pulled off her ungainly sunbonnet, leaving the soft, brown hair uncovered to the breeze that began to breathe out of the dingy clouds. And Latham's cheek flushed, as he noted that their rippling masses held "a knot of ribbon blue," which he recognized as the same broad band she had playfully made him wear in place of his discarded sling on the wounded arm.

"You mean to wear that ribbon?" he asked hastily; but his eyes gleamed meaningful.

"Why not?" she answered, without looking up. "It is a nice ribbon, even if aunty does keep me supplied from her blockade treasures. And then"—her voice softened a little—"it has been useful to a—friend."

"Thank you! I can never forget that!" he cried.

She looked gravely at him, with never a blush, as she answered, simply:

"It is a very little thing to remember, I am sure." Then she undid the ribbon deftly, as she added: "Lend me your knife."

The slim fingers quickly severed an end of the blue ribbon,—though with rather jagged edges,—knotted them into the ring of the locket, and skillfully pinned the silk securely in the lining of his pocket, just above his heart. Then they replaced the knot, drew the sunbonnet over it, and held out the knife.

"And now—but only for the present," she said simply, "we must say, Good-bye!"

The gate was open, the impatient horse was in the road and the man beside him. But he seized the brown little hand in a fervid clasp, as he cried:

"Is this all you—*can* say, Jen?"

Again she let her eyes fall; again a vivid blush swept her cheek; and the voice was very sweet and low that answered him:

"It is all I must say."

"And when you feel that I am leaving you, perhaps forever! When you know all that I—"

"It is because of all I know," she interrupted gently, "that I must say no more. Good-bye!"

"And you will not forget me, Jen?" he pleaded, still holding her hand. "Even if I am killed—"

"Heaven forbid! and guard you, dear friend!" she broke in solemnly; and the hand she gently withdrew from his trembled, as she grew a shade more pale. "But I have hope, and high one, for you, Mr. Latham. I will think of you often, as the best and gentlest

friend I have known. Even if you go back to your world, after the war and learn to forget Jen Freeman; even if you come to laugh at all the things we have said,—no! do not stop me, for I mean what I say now,—then I will still be true to my promise—will always be—your friend! So, good-bye!”

Her voice trembled a little as she spoke, but once more she fixed her great, brown eyes bravely on his; once more she held out firmly her little brown hand. And the man—yielding to the truth and will of her pure womanhood—bent his head over it, pressed his lips upon it, and, vaulting to saddle without one word, galloped rapidly up the steep path.

Jen leaned against the gatepost an instant, while swift changes passed over the face she raised to the dusky sky, as a turn shut the rider from her view. Then—forgetful of her little family and of their bucket on the ground near by—she turned and flew toward the house, mounting to Master Willie’s perch flushed and breathless, but with sparkling eyes. Once only she spoke—mounting the steep stairs. Then with a gasp, between a sob and a laugh, she murmured:

“Oh! he *does* love me!”

Taking the old seaman’s telescope from the bench, Jen swept the road until it rested on an open stretch beyond; and, next instant, the rapid riding soldier passed before the glass. As he did so, he checked his horse suddenly, bringing him down to a walk and seeming to speak to some one in the thick bushes just beyond the opening.

For just there—and as suddenly as though a wood-gnome, springing out of the earth—a strange, bent

figure of a man parted the bushes and stood stooping on his staff. Very aged and bent nearly double, the figure had been tall, if walking upright. It was draped in a tattered cloak of coarse gray stuff, and the long locks of hair, and the flowing beard, were snow white, but strangely coarse. A dirty, faded green shade was pulled down over what might be sightless eyes, from the figure's pose; but the quavering, nasal voice that comes at the rider's approach, suggests that he is seen, from the words:

"Mornin', sol'jer! Bad wether fur leavin' yer gell, ben't et?"

"Who are you! And what the devil do you mean?" Latham queried, as he checked his horse.

"Seen yer," the man answered with a senile chuckle and feebly nodding his head. "Seen yer m'sef, by th' gate yan."

"By the gate!" Latham exclaimed. "You must have devilish good eyes, you old idiot!" The gate was fully a mile away, by the road; and, even had the cripple crossed country, it seemed impossible he could have come so far.

"I be n't speakin' 'fense, be I?" the old man quavered on. "Hain't I knowed Phil Freeman's gell sence a-bornin'? An' I sez she ar the nicest gell en fifteen mile!"

Mollified by this praise, even from such a source, Latham replied good humoredly:

"Well, Belisarius, you'll find many people to agree with you! Here!" He tossed a shin plaster note at the supposed beggar, who clutched it eagerly, but without thanks, as he answered:

"Menny on 'em! Menny on 'em; an' erspeshul th' yung man frum Gadsden; an' th' han'sum Yankee cap'n. She hain't never mad' no differ 'twixt 'em—Johnnie, nor nuther."

"Oh! she hasn't?" Latham checked the horse he had touched with the spur, curious to know what the old man meant, yet half ashamed of his question.

"But who are these men you talk of?"

"I hain't countin' 'em, be I?" the man answered. "Th' Gadsden boy she air sweet on like, dun rid ter th' war, but she year from un reg'lar; an' th' Yank, he rides 'long, 'casshunal, jess fur see'n Jin Freeman."

Latham stared at the speaker, as Cæsar at the soothsayer. But, equally disgusted with himself and his interlocutor, he made no reply, as the other drivelled on:

"An' yer ben't 'tuk 'long o' her y' seff, be yer? 'Cos I seen yer a bitin' her han' an' a kissin ov—"

"Shut up! You cursed old liar!" the soldier roared, turning his horse and digging him with the spur, as though to ride down the speaker. But the cripple stood motionless, not seeming to see him; and with a quick change of hand—and with thorough disgust on his face—he turned the brute again and galloped away from the ugly rencontre.

Scarcely had the sound of his rapid hoofs died away, when the old, bent form stood erect and strong; the cloak was tossed off and the hair and beard removed by a strong hand, revealing the features of John Holden. Ugly malice and hate gleamed

from his eyes, as he raised his hand after the flying man and growled through his teeth:

“Cursid be yer, man-hunting varmint! Ef I be n’t able ter strike yer body now, ’like I hev ’leff yer soul a-flamin’ like hell-fire! Ef I hev lied ter yer, th’ Lord lets his’n lie ter ther en’mys. The chil’n ov Izrul derceivt ther hethin an’ spiled ’em, too! I dar’ not riz ther mounting by killin’ yer now, fur thar’s gret wurk fur me ter do this day! But yer life’s mine! An’ I hev ge’en yer wot’ll mek it bitter, tell I cum fur it, ez I hev ther right ter come! I calls down vengeance on yer!”

With flaming eyes and clenched hand raised on high, the fanatic towered grim and fell against the dusk background of closer rolling clouds that now began to pour out their deluge on him. But, scarce noting the rain, Holden turned back, still bareheaded and muttering to himself; ever and again raising his hand in imprecation, as though to direct a bolt from the dense clouds straight on the head of his foe.

And Jen Freeman, still sweeping the opening with her glass, saw the old Unionist pass from the bush; and noted his strange gesticulations. Could Latham have seen him? she thought. How strange, if he had, that nothing had happened to either; how strange that Holden should have chanced on the road at that very moment. Could he be watching the officer and spying on his movements? It all seemed so strange to her; but, as she looked, stranger still it grew. For Holden stopped, under the storm, and resumed his disguise.

Utterly baffled—nervous with undefined dread and worn by the repression of the past week, Jen shivers as she lays down the glass and slowly descends to her own room. There—for the second time in many a long month—she again locks the door, throws herself upon the bed and buries her face in the pillow. But this time overtaxed nature seeks relief in that feminine solace, “a good cry.”

CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT'S SURPRISES.

THOROUGHLY disgusted at the senile drivel he had heard,—but more so with himself for having even stopped to hear it,—Latham galloped over the open roadway, careless of the storm that soon drenched him. But swift as moved his fresh steed, swifter came the fast crowding thoughts to his brain, unbidden, but resistless. He had just faced the first great disappointment of his sunny life, for he felt he loved this woman truly and tenderly. In after years, men may laugh at such early sorrows; but, even then, the laugh too often only masks the truth that the grief, at its time, was keen and real; more keen, because it had to be borne in secret and without the balm of sympathy. For, while it may be true that “all the world loves a lover,” it certainly is fact that all the world laughs at a discarded one.

So, while Jen Freeman's woman's nature sobs out its sorrow, the man of whom she thinks races through the storm, striving to button tight under his jacket memories that gnaw like the teeth of the hidden fox of Spartan fable. And, not recalling their

aptness at the moment, he verifies the lines of the great German:

From the bounds of truth careering,
Man, the wild one, onward sweeps;
With each hasty impulse, veering
Down to passion's troubled deeps!

For, spite of will and self-contempt,—spite of coerced dwelling upon her gentleness, her truth, her frank and tender friendship, so well proved,—the man's mind will revert to doubts and bitter queries. Those nebulous rivals, named by his strange interviewer, rise above his enforced praises of her worth; and, strive as he will, the white-robed form he saw at midnight crossing the farm yard, comes up before him, plain, distinct and with sinister suggestion. In his fondness for twisting quotations, Beverly Latham had often tried to tease his sister with the words—

“Beware of jealousy!
It is a green-eyed lobster which doth eat
The meat it feeds us on!”

But he did not recall them in his present mood, nor would he have confessed that now, for the first time in his life, the base passion really possessed him; that he was not only jealous—but of a shadow, barely hinted at by his mind's eye. For inscrutable is that mechanism put in us by the great Artificer; so tremendous, so intricate—yet so delicate as to jar from its centers at an airy touch!

And one part of the intricate human machine began to correct the errors of the other, ere the long ride

was done. For the sufferer had breakfasted lightly, and the rough ride and thorough drenching began to tell upon the more material man, distracting his mind somewhat from less material gnawings. Nor need it seem to his discredit that Lieutenant Latham realized that he was hungry; for that lord was dis-sective philosopher—if not great poet—who reminded us that civilized man might live without books or lady-love; but that to him cook and dinner are the very staffs of life.

So the sighing young lover was, measurably at least, consoled, when he galloped up to his camp and threw his rein to a trooper. For the corporal, expecting his much-missed commander, had made the shanty as comfortable as possible, with a huge fire, and a nosesome odor of unusual camp luxury—fried bacon and eggs. And, dried, dined and refreshed by his pet pipe, the young commander lounged comfortably on his camp stool; dreaming dreams perhaps, but not wholly of the nightmare's breeding.

Into these post-prandial musings glided the philosophy—early learned of men, especially in wartime—that women do not always know their own minds; and that Miss Jen, not being made of adamant by any means, might yet be made to melt. As for the old beggar, he was doubtless a madman—certainly a liar. For had she not told him—yes, and repeated again—that there was nobody else? And could he doubt her plighted words, for the drivel of a wayside tramp? To the devil, then, with the young man from Gadsden, who wrote regularly; and as for a handsome Yankee captain, Jen was too loyal a little

rebel—the farmer too staunch to the cause, for that! What about the white figure in the moonlight? Nothing! Had he not said then that he was an ass? And now he was a bigger one—and a tired one too—and—

And then Lieutenant Latham slept the sleep of the clear conscience and the good digestion, in spite of the sorrows late so cumulative and so heavy upon him.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright, brought back from the shores of Lethe by sound of rapid hoofs, quick challenge and hasty reply. Next instant the corporal was at the door, saluting:

“Leftenant, news from the front!” Then the man went on to say that the river pickets had noticed large bodies of Federal cavalry—supposed to be under command of Colonel Streight and numbering at least five full regiments—massing on the north bank of the Tennessee river. Refugees from the other side, the report concluded, said the command was a heavy one; and was force-marched for the river.

In one instant, love, doubts, dreams had all fled from Latham’s brain; leaving only ambition. The longed-for chance had come to him; the enemy was in front and he would be the first to meet him. He was no longer the doubting lover; only the confident soldier. His orders were given promptly and clearly:

“Send one man, on a fresh horse, to carry this to Gadsden, corporal. Mount and inspect the men, at once. We must ride hard to the river!”

Ten minutes later, ammunition served out and arms inspected, the camp was deserted; and Beverly Latham rode at the head of his squad, through the fast closing dusk, straight for the Tennessee, ten miles distant. Nor was it any pleasure jaunt, that splashing through mud and plunging across gullies, under a driving rain; but the horses were fresh, the men wearied of inactivity, and hailing any excitement after long idleness in camp; and, moreover, they had implicit confidence in the pluck and coolness of their young commander. So the squad went forward fast and cheerily; not seldom breaking into song, when tired of chaff and jest.

Riding alone, at their head, Latham let his fancy have full play, conjuring a thousand chances for some hit that might win him a name, now that he would, indeed, have first chance at the advancing foe. And any thought of Jen Freeman that now ran through his brain was the healthful one that she should find her refusal had left him no milksop; that she should not have cause to blush for the man who had offered her no craven's heart.

Darkness had fallen, when the muddy riders trotted down the heavily wooded slopes leading to the river bank. The squad was halted; and Latham rode forward with the corporal to question the picket, who had sent in the glad tidings. He repeated his report that a heavy body of cavalry was massed, just before them, across the river; and it was confirmed by the long line of camp fires, already gleaming for a mile or more, and extending some distance inland.

Moving cautiously along the bank, Latham's quick soldierly intuition told him that this must indeed be the long expected column of Colonel Streight; and his estimate placed it even higher in numbers than reported. His instinct told him that the enemy expected no resistance, and would cross at leisure, either that night, or at early dawn; believing there was no force in their front. The prevalence of camp fires, indicating cooking and bivouac, told him that the chances were all in favor of a halt for the night; and a safe and leisurely crossing at daylight. But war is a game in which chances must not be taken which skill can possibly replace; so Latham quickly revolved the means of deceiving the enemy, and of delaying him until news of his movement could reach his superiors in the rear. There was but one way, he concluded, but that was worth trying. He remembered Magruder's ruse to delay McClellan's advance up the Peninsula, the year before; and his plan was formed at once.

Along the southern bank he found large quantities of chopped wood, that had been cut by the flying residents but not hauled away; and there were huge piles of dried brush and refuse from it. Putting his nine men to work at long intervals, and aiding them by brain, hand and ubiquitous encouragement, he needed but a few hours to perfect his plan. The rain had stopped, leaving a dull steamy mist over the stream, which permitted his work to remain unnoticed; and through it the camp fires opposite glowed dim, but gigantic, "making the night a steam of fire."

Before midnight, the Confederates had built some forty fire piles, ready for lighting; and so placed behind screening bushes that the absence of moving forms about them would not be noticed by a night glass, from across the river. And by that time the opposite camp was still; its fires dying down rapidly; the sounds of movement of horse and man less frequent; and plain evidence showing that no movement was projected until dawn. Then Latham gave his orders; and soon, up and down the southern bank camp fires crackled and shot up blazing,—here, there—above, below—rapidly multiplying as though a great force were moving down to camp there, ghost-like and silent as the phantom host at Prague.

And, as the fires began to burn the troopers crept down to the river's edge, beyond the glare and close in under the bank. They were stationed fifty yards apart; each man with full instructions. And, almost immediately, motion began in the opposing camp. Horses were heard galloping to and fro; then the assembly sounded, cutting the night clear and shrill, and borne to the gratified ears of the Confederate, as taken up by bugle after bugle. It was plain that Colonel Streight's force was under arms; probably drawn up in line of battle, awaiting attack of a heavy force supposed to be in front of him. Then came the rumble of wheels; growing clearer and mingled with hoarse command, as horse artillery galloped down to the banks and unlimbered to command the crossing.

So far, his ruse had succeeded well, and Latham's hopes were high that he might yet delay the crossing

of the Federals beyond sunrise. His brain was at work, wholly intent on details of his plan, as the corporal passed him at a double quick. Barely pausing, and not stopping to salute, the man said, with a gleeful chuckle:

“Reckon as how we won’t ’tack ’em in force, to-night, leftenant. ’Pears they sorter outnumber us.”

But the officer was all soldier now, and in no mood for jesting, even if congratulatory. He answered curtly:

“To your post, sir! I will do the reckoning for you!”

The corporal saluted this time; falling at once back into his long, swinging double-quick; but chuckling good naturedly as he muttered, this time strictly to himself:

“Darned ef he ain’t got his boots on, sure! He’ll do—that youngster will!”

But, intent on still closer calculation of the enemy, the officer crept further along the bank; beyond his extreme post, and to the point of a curve that jutted into the muddy stream and narrowed the distance across it. There, moving cautiously along the slippery edge, he suddenly stopped, listening intently. Surely he caught a scraping sound, and soft swish of parted brush, as though something were dragged along the ground. Listening with ears acute from habit, and sharpened now by closer peril—he could hear nothing. For seconds he stood motionless and eager; but dead silence only answered his quest, convincing him of error. Thinking it must have been a

cat driven from his lair by water, or some other "varmint" roused by the fire and creeping to it, he lowered his ready pistol and once more turned to scan the opposite bank. So, for some minutes, when the sound again reached him, and unmistakably this time.

A dull, steamy haze, from the fires behind, lit the point into half-twilight, where dark objects were visible; and, as he parted the brush and stole toward the sounds, Latham again brought his pistol to an aim, ordering sternly:

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

A crouching figure, bent low over some heavy object, was shoving it slowly toward the stream; and, as he peered closer, the soldier saw it was a man, tugging at a skiff just at the water's edge. The figure stood still, not turning toward him, nor rising erect; but, even in the dim light he felt there was something familiar in the pose, which was confirmed by the quavering, nasal reply to his challenge:

"Yer wud n't a-kilt er po' ole man, wud yer? I hez n't done no wrong, hez I?"

"You! What the devil brought you?" Latham cried, astounded at recognizing the cripple of the morning's rencontre at such a distance from it. "How did you get here?"

"I kem 'cross kentry, sol'jer," the cripple faltered, in thin, nasal key. "I lives cross yan' an' I ken't cross 'cep'n' by hither. Don' yer shoot, sol'jer; my darter an' two sick chiller be lyin' yan', an' ther Yanks 'll 'vade 'em, 'cep'n' I gits." And with the words, the old man tugged at the skiff, now well nosing the

water, but with more strength than his age and frailty seemed to justify.

"Halt! One more step and I'll blow your brains out!" the youth ordered sternly. "If the Yanks hang every covite in Tennessee, no man shall cross to-night!"

"Yer hain't got no feelin', hez yer?" whined the other. But he left the boat and crept a step nearer to the soldier. "Et be n't no wrong fur a po' ole man ter git by yan' ter pertec' his wimmin folk, be et?"

"Halt, where you are!" Latham again ordered, the meaning of his words underscored by the click of the pistol lock. "I'll take care of you 'by yan,' where we can talk in a better light. One movement, and I'll scatter your brains!"

Both figures stood as rigid as if cast in iron; but the lieutenant put his left hand to his lips and gave a shrill signal whistle. Then far along the muddy shore came the slump of heavy boots, as the corporal ran to reply, the sounds drawing closer and growing more distinct each instant until just behind them.

"This way, corporal!" Latham called over his shoulder, half turning his head, to give the order.

The movement nearly proved fatal. At the instant, the bent figure reared itself, towering close above him; the brawny right hand raised in air, and clutching a deadly knife. With a spring, "like mountain cat who guards her young," the knife descended, aimed straight at Latham's heart. But even in that surprise, coolness and agility saved the young soldier. Lightly shifting one foot, he half turned his body, avoiding the blade; but the heavy arm

descended on his wounded shoulder with tremendous force, that staggered him. At the same instant the quick right hand swung the heavy pistol, its barrel striking the bony wrist of his assailant, and sending the knife whirling harmless from the paralyzed hand.

There was a hoarse yell of mingled rage, hate and pain; and the corporal, racing up, found his officer still reeling under the blow, but all alone.

"After him! Quick!" Latham panted, pointing to the sound of breaking brush beyond, and staggering toward it. "A spy! Kill him on sight!"

Thorough search was made among the bushes of the point, and many a rod inland along the shore; but the spy had disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared, and the baffled searchers gave up the chase. Returning, they floated the boat, shoving her well out into the current, and watching her bob and whirl into it, as she drifted rapidly away.

"Curse him! He'll not 'git by hither,' all the same!" Latham said, grimly. "I was an ass to be deceived. I should have shot him at first. But he did give me a thundering whack!"

He stooped among the trampled brush, seeming to search for something; then added, as he held up the knife:

"Well! That was better than being carved by this dull affair, all the same! Maybe Shelby is a prophet, after all, and I may get my troop, if I hold 'em off long enough."

And as the two peril-seasoned men—rough, hardy veteran and society-petted young aristocrat, side by side—trudged back to the outpost, the Virginian's

hand slipped into his inside pocket, touching the talisman locket that told of one pure love—the ribbon knot that spoke of a newer one, but not less pure. And his heart rose in thankfulness to the great Guardian, for recently averted peril; and not less for the great boon of the love of such pure women, watching for him ceaselessly. And then, there was little doubt mingling with the thoughts that traveled swift to the far-away farm; querying whether the pure innocence he loved so well, felt in her dreams that his loyal heart was full of her at that dull midnight!

CHAPTER XIII.

A RUSE AND ITS RESULTS.

PERFECT quiet reigned in the camp of the Federals on the north bank of the Tennessee, broken only by the neigh of a restive horse, or the challenge of the changed sentries—borne dimly across on the night wind.

Colonel Streight was a bold, skillful and dashing commander; but Latham knew him to possess also the prudence and sagacity of a good one. So he felt that his ruse had done good service, so far. For, plainly expecting no attack from the Confederates before morning, the enemy was evidently sleeping on his arms, in readiness to repulse any made at daylight, or—failing an advance upon him—to force his passage of the river. And, calculating all this rapidly, the young Confederate felt that his opponent had slept long enough, and determined promptly not to let him fall into habits of sloth. Passing along his scattered line of pickets, Latham gave careful and plain instructions to each man, it being now scarcely an hour before dawn. Then, having replenished the fires with light brush, the little force remained still and silent.

Half an hour later, the lieutenant crept down to the bank again, peering eagerly across the dim stream. No sight, nor sound, rewarded his patience, in that "darkest hour before the dawn." All was still and calm in the Federal camp. Then he raised his pistol, aimed at an opposite fire; and his signal shot rang out.

Quickly a carbine answered it, from the extreme right, another following from the left, a third near him, until nine shots had echoed through the woods. And each man, after firing, started up the bank, at double-quick, loading as he ran. At fifty paces he halted, fired again, and raced away another fifty; then firing and coming back to post at double quick.

What effect this firing had—in one way, at least—Latham never knew; for the distance and darkness were great, and the men aimed only at the smouldering fires. But its main effect was precisely what he hoped; for again the assembly sounded and all was bustle, stir and movement in the Federal camp. Then came the rushing sound of moving squadrons, hastening to the river's edge; and that suddenly cut by the crack of light artillery, as the guns vomited fire into the night and sent grape shot hurtling among the tree tops, and dropping branches from them, sometimes near the racing rebel shooters. Then a sheeted glare blazed out far on the Federal right; taken up by the next company, and running the whole length of the line, as file-firing began. Faster flew the grape-shot, now in better range; closer and swifter hissed the bullets, thudding with ugly sound against bank, or trunk, or bough. Then,

from the center of his position, Latham raced along the bank in one direction, the corporal in the other. Five minutes more—whether known to the enemy, under the roar of his own fire, or not—and the little squad had obeyed the order, “Cease firing”; had raced up the bank, throwing fresh brush on the fires, as they passed; and every man was squatting safely behind a tree, wiping his carbine carefully and—waiting.

“Pretty lively firing, corporal,” Latham said cheerfully, behind his tree. “Our opposite neighbor is having a pretty hot skirmish—all to himself. Hasn’t our range quite, though.”

“Near enough, sir,” the non-com. answered to the point.

“Run back and inspect the mounts, corporal. See if any of them are restive. It wouldn’t do to have one break away, from this noise. We must be ready to cut, when he crosses. If he’s the soldier I think, he’ll force the river, as soon after day as he is convinced we will not.”

The corporal only saluted, in reply. He fully agreed with his superior’s view; but one reproof in a night was enough for that veteran, and he would “reckon” no more. Double-quicking into the gloom, he was soon out of sight and hearing; but even then he only relieved his mind, by grumbling as he ran:

“Yes; he’ll do!”

Gradually the Federal fire slackened, the small arms silenced, and only the occasional boom of the field artillery broke the silence, as the gray of dawn

crept into the east and, gradually the daily miracle was repeated, under the gentle mandate:

“Let there be light!”

From his lookout, Latham's field glass showed him the whole Federal force, drawn up in line of battle. In good position—commanding the crossing and flanked by well-posted batteries, to rake the advancing enemy—the commander awaited the attack. But gradually the light broadened; and the sun, rising beyond the mountains, looked down bright and peaceful upon the motionless array, gilding their arms and laughing back in ripples of fire from movement of blade and barrel.

But still no movement broke the quiet of the southern bank; and after a half-hour of careful watching, Latham almost danced with joy, over the gain of valuable time. For he well knew that, in a cavalry raid like this, every moment counts, and a halt at its very outset has almost the effect of a repulse. And now aides and couriers dashed along the line, and plumed commanders, detaching from its ranks, spurred toward an elevated plateau, whence a finely mounted officer was sweeping the south with his field glass. Closing about him as they saluted, the regimental commanders joined in earnest talk, as it seemed to the watchful Confederate. Yes, there was no doubt about it: Colonel Streight was holding a council-of-war.

Then the officers galloped back; movement was seen in the line of battle; the artillery quickened its fire, with closer range; and, covered by it, a strong force of skirmishers was crossed. Deployed along

the shore, they advanced cautiously up the slight ascent, reached the now smouldering decoy fires, passed them unresisted, and entered the thicker woods beyond the rise. Then, to right, left and front of them began a scattering but rapid fire, long intervalled,—as Latham's men repeated their trick of the night before,—and doing little damage, as the shooters ran from tree to tree. But the fire was promptly returned all along the Federal line; the skirmishers advanced into the woods still more cautiously; and Colonel Streight himself crossed the river, for closer survey of this obstruction to his well-laid plans.

By this time—for the sun was now two hours high—the Federal column should have been well on its way to Gadsden, galloping gaily to success, unresisted and unexpected. But still, the Federal had been no soldier to attempt advance—even though the firing had now ceased on the enemy's side—until he had brushed aside this force in his front. So he brought over his whole command, artillery and all; arranged his line of battle on the crest, and deployed a heavy force of skirmishers. But—somewhat to his natural surprise, not one shot disputed his movement; even when the heavy line of skirmishers entered the woods, moving slowly and firing to feel their way. And very impatiently the Federal sat his horse, at head of the reserve; marveling if the enemy could indeed be luring him into an ambushade. Another half hour of surprise and impotent fuming, and then a courier from the commander of the skirmish line galloped up.

"Colonel!" he said, saluting, "Captain White orders me to report that he can find no enemy in front of him!"

Nor was this more surprising than it was true; for at that instant Beverly Latham was racing down the Gadsden road at the head of his jubilant squad, six good miles away from the scene of his successful ruse.

But as the racing rebels passed through a rocky defile, heavily wooded on either side, a movement showed alongside of a felled tree; and cautiously the grim, grizzled head of John Holden reared itself, nodding with the movements of a serpent's. And in his red-green eyes blazed a light deadly and venomous with hate; potent to blast its object, had the fable of the Python been reared on truth's broad basis.

"Twic't! Twic't ye hev 'scaped me, ye murd'rer!" the old man muttered, rising and shaking his fist toward the flying squad. "Twic't! an' now ter hev no gun! Yer time hev not cum, curse on yer! But it'll cum, ez sur' ez Gawd sits thar!" Again he lifted hand and face on high; and his lips moved rapidly and his eyes literally blazed with fanatical hate: "He hev ge'en yer into my han', fur Hank's blood! I hev swar th' yoath; and Gawd hev hear'd it—sho ez death!"

Moodily he ceased; sitting upon the log and peering up the road for the Federal advance. And, at its approach, Holden strode into the roadway; halting and facing Captain White.

"Well, you are a fine guide!" that officer cried, as he recognized the Unionist from a distance. "Why

were you missing when most needed, Holden?" he added sternly, as he drew rein, nearer.

"I war en th' hand ov ther Lord!" Holden answered solemnly. "Et war His will, ez stopt me frum crossin', ez I hed ge'en th' wurd."

"Well, I don't know about you and the Lord, sir," the trooper returned bluntly. "But you'll have the devil's own time satisfying the colonel, unless his present humor's better than I judge."

"I hev n't axt no favors, hev I?" the mountaineer answered boldly, but deliberately. "You'uns hez n't buy'd John Holden, hez ye? Wen yer pays him fur sarvis', time 'nuff ter sass him. An' wen he talks ter Streight, he'll talk no differ, nuther. Wot I hez promis', I hez dun, I 'low; an' I dun't fur ther cause an' ther flag—an' not fur no man's sayin'—n'mo'n fur his gold!"

"Give him a mount, sergeant!" Captain White ordered shortly; adding to Holden: "I've no time to waste on hedge preachers, Mr. Spy. Mount and await the colonel here."

He trotted forward without another glance at the old man, standing calm and grim by the side of the strong, spirited and well groomed black the trooper had led out to him.

Now, to say that Colonel Streight was angry, when Captain White's courier reported no enemy in front, fails wholly to convey that frame of his mind to which his junior alluded to John Holden. That the atmosphere around him was not literally blue, for several seconds, was the fault of natural causes; none whatever of his own.

But this Federal was not the man to waste time upon vain regrets, even when his mortified vanity held before his self-esteem the taunt that he had been tricked and duped; and by no very novel process at that.

So, forming his command the colonel rode away, rapidly, as though to escape from the recent unpleasant past, and eager to begin that raid which was to become so memorable from the daring and dash of the invaders, and the skill and courage of those who met and foiled them.

And, by the time the column's head had reached John Holden's stand the Federal commander had forgotten his wrath. His mind was busy with plan and combination; and the appearance of this missing guide—or spy, or what he might be made—came pat to the train of his thought. So, he merely motioned Holden to his side, without a word; and the mountaineer—gaining the saddle with agility unsuited to his years—rode in alongside the colonel, mute and grave as himself and making neither salutation nor salute.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN SOUTHERN WOMAN'S WAY.

THE sun has risen only twice since Latham scampered from the foe he had fooled at the crossing of the Tennessee; but the day-god has looked, meantime, on busy action of men. Colonel Streight has occupied Gadsden—to his credit, be it said, treating the people with courtesy and moderation; and has crossed into Georgia, moving toward Rome. But now he retraces his steps, for he learns that Forrest has heard of his raid, and is force-marching his command to cut him off. This is more than the Federal bargained for; and, brave and adventurous as he is, he has no great desire to try conclusions with “the Flail,”—as Forrest, then the terror of the Southwest, was called,—especially as the Confederate force may be larger than his own.

So evening of the second day found Streight in camp near Gadsden, his men and horses worn by forced marches. And, far nearer than he knew, his redoubtable antagonist, Forrest, was straining every nerve to try conclusions with him in the morning. And that same night Latham's little squad lay in the woods—not far from the Federal command and hanging on its flanks, but unable to cut through it

and join Forrest. And—though no scout nor courier could reach his covert—the youngster had contrived to send couriers with useful information to the column he felt certain was in pursuit. This had reduced his squad to five men, but the ardent young soldier was in high good humor, spite of his precarious position; and now, not being on strict duty before the enemy, he hobnobbed easily with his recently-suppressed corporal and, lying near the camp fire, he was saying:

“No, corporal, I don’t doubt we can join the general and share the glory of the defeat of this raiding party.”

“Darn th’ glory, sir!” bluntly answered the veteran non-com. “I don’t expect any commish; but I’d like a hand in lickin’ this Yank, jess th’ same. This ’ere glory’s all hum,” the corporal went on. “When I come to ’list, my whole town was riz. The big law’r made us his biggest speech, an’ tole us futur’ ages were lookin’ back on us. The newspaper printed Latin, ’bout it’s being sweet to die fo’ yer country. But that verse wasn’t to my likin’, so I went to see my gall, for good-bye. Hanged ef *she* didn’t pin a cockade on me an’ spout, ‘Go wher’ glory waits thee!’ I jess’ remarked glory could wait; an’ I didn’t like th’ cockade, for mos’ every fellow they was pinned to vamoosed when time come to go to th’ front!”

“But *you* came, all the same,” Latham put in.

“Oh, yes; an’ they presented us a flag an’ quoted poetry by the bookful; an’ one scrub tole us to come back with our shields, or on ’em! What that tune

meant, I didn't ask; for the greenhorn next me brought down his gun on my pet corn, and next thing, we were marching away to 'The gall I leff' behin' me!' Now, here I am, a corporal, and no chance o' being anything else. But the big lawyer got an exemption, an' the scrub that talked 'bout our shields is a clerk in the quartermaster's office!"

"Is he?" Latham laughed. "Then he's all right."

"Is he? I doubt it, smartly!" the corporal retorted, biting off a goodly mouthful of "nigger-head" and walking away from the fire. "I doubt it; for he married—my gall!"

That same night Jen Freeman was restlessly pacing the broad piazza of Dave Hartley, the foremost merchant of Gadsden. The very day that Latham left her home, Jen had received a note from her old friend and schoolmate, Sis Hartley, urging her to come for a short visit. And Farmer Freeman—ever unselfish where his girl was concerned—had urged her to accept and to recuperate, after the strain and care of nursing their wounded guest. So she had been driven over by Master Willie; and, only after his return, had come the news of the Federals' advance, soon followed by their appearance in the town.

Naturally the girl had thought much of her convalescent—"friend"; but she was too proud to ask. Now,—the homely supper over and Sis busy with household cares,—Mr. Hartley had ridden away to get the latest news of the Federal column, and of the possible truth of rumors that Forrest would overtake it next morning. So Jen—left to her thoughts, and not finding them too pleasant—was pacing the

piazza and peering vainly for some star in the cloudy canopy above her. Suddenly the girl stopped, certain that she heard her own name spoken. Then, in the dead stillness of the sultry evening, she distinctly heard the repetition:

“Miss Freem’n! Miss Jen!”

The girl had lived too long in an atmosphere charged with real danger to be frightened by a shadow; so she was little startled by the appearance of a white, vaguely defined form, just beyond the gallery. Moving rapidly toward it, she found the form was that of a woman, and that it made motions to warn her to silence. Then the woman spoke, in a hoarse whisper.

“Miss Jen,” she said rapidly, “I hez cum’ thro’ dark an’ nite’, ter warn yer ’bout yer young man!”

To this abrupt preface, Jen was conscious that she replied only by a vivid blush, unseen in the darkness, as the woman went on:

“An’ yer hez ther rite ter be warnt, fur E’m Lize Holden, yer war good ter, wen my man war kilt! But paw, he ar’ jess plum sot agin yer young man, ’long ov his yoath ter hev blood! Paw hev fix’t ter lead them blue-coat critters ter night jess w’ere yer young man be lying hit in th’ woods, a-shootin’ at th’ blue-coat critter cump’ny. An’ I’ jess ’low’d, Miss Jen, ez yer shud be warnt.”

“Are you sure?” Jen asked, her breath coming quick and gasping.

“I don’ look a-foolin’, does I?” the woman retorted. “I hev’ heer’d paw swar ’ter the cap’n ov



TAKING THE BRIDLE HIMSELF, HE STRODE CAREFULLY
AWAY.—Page 184.

ther critter cump'ny thet he'd show'm th' Johnnie wot fooled 'em at ther crossin'!"

Jen realized nothing of what this meant; her lover's prowess being all unknown to her. But she did realize that this lover's safety hung in the balance, and she asked, quickly:

"Do you know where Mr. Latham is to-night?"

"Yer don' think I hev trudged ter yer house an' then 'long ter Gadsding 'thout knowin', does yer?" Mrs. Holden answered promptly. "Ther Johnnies be a lyin' three mile by yan; an' paw's a-goin' ter show ther blue-coats whar, jess at twelve ter night!"

"What will happen!" Jen exclaimed, more to herself than to her interlocuter. But the latter responded drearily:

"Hangin', sholy! I heered paw 'low ter ther cap'n, ez yer young man an' hisn war spies, inside ther lines; and ther' blue-coat, he 'lowed ez he hed plenty rope fur stretchin' ov spies' necks, he did!"

Then, as by a flash of God's lightning, Jen Freeman's heart was revealed to her. All its resistance to pleading, to absence and to ordinary danger, yielded before this threatened disgraceful ending of a bright career, plotted by hate she could not comprehend. But, then and there, the girl knew that her heart had gone out to the young soldier past recall; and that, with her heart, her life was his for any service it might render. But nothing mawkish weakened the truth of Jen's confession to herself; but, rather, she gloried in her new found wealth of love; and felt it strengthen her for prompt and active usefulness. Glancing through the window, she saw the

clock pointing close to ten; and, quickly deciding her plan, she asked the woman:

"Why did you not warn him, instead of coming so far to speak to me?"

"Cos, arter ther shootin' et ther dance," Lize answered promptly, "paw hev made me swar er yoath never ter speak ter him agin. He'd a kilt me if I hadn't a sware; an' I ken't brek my yoath, ken I?"

"Can you lead me to his camp?" Jen asked, no longer hesitating.

"Y'er hev n't er critter, hev ye?" Lize answered.

"Yes; come with me," Jen said, and, stepping from the low piazza, she passed swiftly to the stables. One mule, old and vicious, stood alone by the door. The stalls were empty, the men and Mr. Hartley having ridden off on every mount available to learn news of the raiders. Jen leaned against the stable door one instant, pressing her hand to her fast throbbing heart. But the unwonted dizziness soon passed away, and she said to the woman:

"Come, show me the way! We can walk!"

Without one word, Lize Holden drew the faded shawl—which seemed part of her—closer over her head, and struck out in a long swinging gate for the side fence. And long afterwards Jen remembered her glance into the kitchen window, that showed Sis Hartley's buxom arms, dough to the elbow, as she hastened her maid of all work:

"Hurry up, stupid! I've left Miss Jen long enough alone. She'll be skipping with some raider, next thing!"

But, at the moment, Jen's thoughts centered to but one point—the safety of the man who loved her—whom she had discarded, in her pride and folly; whom—as she now knew, she loved with all the strength of her fresh, pure soul!

“Go on, fast as you can!” she whispered to Lize Holden, as she passed the window's gleam. “Get there before them, and ask anything you wish of me!”

“I hain't arx't nuthin', hez I?” the woman retorted doggedly, clambering over the fence. “Kin yer tramp?”

“Yes, go on!” Jen urged. “Go fast as you can!”

Dull drops of rain began to fall occasionally, and the summer night grew more sultry, under low-hanging clouds. But Jen Freeman drew the light scarf she chanced to wear closely about her head, and—unmindful alike of rain and heat—followed her strange guide along that strange road, through unknown woods and across ravine and rivulet alike. And once she thought she heard a wild, wondering woman's voice echo through the woods. But she pressed on after her hurrying guide, never recking that Sis Hartley—after search of house and grounds—was hanging over her gate, alone, crying in alarmed anxiety:

“Jen! Jen Freeman! Where *are* you?”

So, over the rough road the two women tramped, for what might have been an hour. They were in dense woods now, dark and silent; the rain falling fitfully and the air sultry and close. A narrow path, that might have been a cattle trail once, and only

distinguishable at night to a born mountaineer, led up a rough steep. Midway on this Lize Holden stopped abruptly.

"Turn rite inter them bushes," she whispered, "an' go 'long rite erhead! Yer'd better holler, ef tha' hails yer, less'n tha' shoots. Yer yung man's a-lyin' hit right in 'yan."

"Are you going to leave me?" Jen asked, with a little shiver."

"I mus' do't, Miss Jen," the widow answered, solemnly. "Yer young man 'ud speak ter me, an' I hez sware my yoath b' Hank's grave! Yer ben't a-dangerin' now; only yer mus' holler ef tha' hails yer, yan!"

She paused a moment, hesitant; then added, rapidly:

"Yer ben't skeart, be yer? Yer hain't needin' ter be. Gawd's a-lookin' down on yer, Miss!"

She seized Jen's hands suddenly in both of her own, pressed her thin lips upon them fervently; then glided away, sprite-like, into the gloom.

Left alone under that thick darkness and soft falling rain, the girl could hear her own heartbeats drumming in her ears. But she was not made of that stuff which gives way with duty unfulfilled; so, parting the bushes, Jen turned to the right and groped her way ahead. Suddenly came a gruff voice, accompanied by rattle of a carbine and click of its lock, in the words:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"A friend!" Jen answered, bravely. "I want Mr. Latham."

Latham had chosen as his hiding a little pocket in the dense woods, beyond the narrow trail; the path to it almost overgrown from disuse, and its rear on the very edge of a ravine. Here he was sleeping soundly, under his stretched waterproof, when the corporal touched his shoulder. Sitting bolt upright, he was wide awake in an instant, pistol in hand; and the next was creeping softly with the man toward the low challenge of the picket. The sounds were plain of some one's approach; snapping twig and swish of leaf coming nearer. Latham's cocked pistol and the corporal's carbine went out to cover the sound, the officer whispering:

"There is only one, and he moves very carelessly!"

"It ain't a he," the veteran whispered back. "Them's wimmin's feet, ef I ever heard 'em in my life!"

Before Latham could speak, a dim form became half visible in the opening, faltering, then halting and calling piteously:

"Mr. Latham! Oh, Mr. Latham!"

The corporal scratched his head vigorously, made a swift right-about and strode to the rear. His officer's voice—quivering with amazement and doubt replied:

"Who calls me? I am here!"

"Oh! Thank heaven, I have found you, at last!" Jen cried, rushing forward. And then—woman's weakness asserting itself, when heroism was no longer imperative—the girl broke into gasping sobs, trembling in every limb.

"*You*, Jen! Alone and in such a night! Don't be frightened! Tell me what this means!" the lover cried in wonderment profound. But his amazement did not prevent his strong arm passing about the quivering form, supporting it tenderly.

"I am not frightened," the girl answered, quickly controlling herself. But she withdrew gently from the supporting arm, as she added rapidly: "But you are in great danger. At this very moment Yankee cavalry is on the way to surprise and capture you, guided by your old enemy, Holden."

"Let them come," Latham answered, quietly. "Now that we are warned, we are safe here."

"You are *not* safe," the girl replied. "They are too many, and they know your hiding place. His daughter, Lize, warned me and guided me here."

"You are right," Latham answered. "Good soldiery tells us to run when fighting is useless, and heels have it. Corporal!" He turned to the waiting soldier, gave rapid orders, and then advanced to the girl again, throwing his waterproof tenderly over her wet and still shivering form. But, even in face of imminent peril—now providing for by his soldier instinct—the thought uppermost in Latham's brain was what real feeling had impelled that delicate, womanly nature to risk the solitude and darkness of that lonesome way, to warn him of his danger.

"I can never, in a whole lifetime, express my gratitude and deep feeling of joy," he said, gravely, "that you have taken such a risk for me!"

"The chief risk was of taking cold," the girl answered quietly. "But you must not waste time;

there is none to spare. Hasten to get away from here!"

"And leave you?" the man cried, suddenly. "I must see you in safety first, then give them the slip afterward."

"Impossible!" she answered, decisively. "You cannot! They are coming from Gadsden. Never mind me, Mr. Latham. I can get back some way." But, in spite of her brave words, Jen Freeman's heart sunk and her voice trembled at the idea of being left wholly alone at such a place and hour. But, loyal to her self-appointed mission to save, she added: "See; they are ready; do not lose an instant!"

As she spoke, gloomy shadows of men, leading their horses carefully, passed across the open space, disappearing down the deep descent to the ravine behind it, and traced by slipping footfall and rolling of displaced stones.

"If they come from Gadsden, you *cannot* return that way," Latham answered decisively. "I owe you my life, doubtless, Miss Jen, for I would not be taken prisoner here and now. The least I can do is to protect you from them. I can make a detour and leave you at home, as I join Forrest."

"You have no extra horse," she hesitated. "One more would hamper you only the more. Go! *Please* go; and I will get back—safely!"

"You *cannot*," he answered, half impatiently; "and you certainly shall not attempt it. You are in my command now; and, at such a moment, my experience must outweigh your scruples. As for a horse,

you shall have one as soon as day breaks. Come, they are ready. Surely you can trust me,—Jen?”

As he spoke, the picket from the road beyond moved noiselessly, but swiftly, toward them.

“Hoofs sounding on the road below, lieutenant,” the man said, rapidly. “Seem a full troop, sir, tho’ I can’t hear plain from the distance.”

“How far off, Bronson,” the officer queried.

“Not over half a mile, I judge, sir.”

“Fall in,” was the curt rejoinder. “The corporal has your horse in the ravine. You see, you must come now,” Latham added, turning to Jen, and again holding out his hand. “Will you not trust me?”

For sole reply she put her hand in his, firmly and confidently. Next instant, he was leading her carefully down the rugged and abrupt descent to what had been a winter torrent’s bed, now dry and rough with loose, pebbly sand. There, Latham rapidly wound a twisted blanket about his pommel, lifted the girl to the seat, with but a word of explanation; and, taking the bridle himself, strode out carefully over the insecure footing. The men, leading their horses, followed in single file, a phantom troop, in seeming, as they toiled silent along their strange way, in deep darkness; emerging into a broader and more level plateau, only after two hours of wearisome tramp.

Nor had the squad been premature in its escape from the confining cañons. They were not half way through the ravine—though shut out from sight and sound by its abrupt sides—when a squad-

ron of cavalry moved quietly up the road beyond the pocket, deployed into wide skirmish line and circled into the woods, to surround and cut off the prize considered certain.

Captain White led the column; and by his side rode John Holden, silent, watchful and implacable for vengeance. For he had lied to the Federal about the escapades and duty of the young rebel; describing his squad as bushwhackers and spies, belonging to no command and fighting only for plunder and for payment for news of the Union movements.

"You are positive of the place?" Captain White asked, as he pushed into the thick cover.

"I ben't a fool, be I?" Holden answered grimly, dismounting from his fine black steed. "Foller me, an' we hez 'em sho'! I hain't brung yer fur fun, hez I? Them 'wackers 'll sholy hang, by sun!"

Warily, cautiously the two men pressed on through bush and brier, reaching the open pocket to find it deserted, and soon joined by the closed-in, but empty-handed skirmishers.

"No captures, lieutenant?" White grimly asked his sub, as the right party closed in on what had been the camp. "The devil! None on *your* side, Mr. Baldwin? Holden, what does this mean?" he added, angrily. "Is this the way you make up your broken promise at the river?"

"I hain't 'splainin', is I?" the mountaineer answered, in voice trembling with baffled hate. "John Holden 'lowed ez how he hed spotted 'em, rite in yere. Ther devil hi'self cudn't a-flew out, 'cep'n we' uns 'ud a seen 'im! I 'low I do be plum beat!"

Seizing a lantern from a sergeant, Captain White moved slowly along the open, throwing the light before him. Then he beckoned his lieutenant, pointing to the wet ground.

"Hoof prints—fresh, too," he said low. "There! that grass is dry; beaten down. It has been pressed by a blanket,"—he stooped and felt the spot,—“and not very long ago! The old fellow was not lying; but the covey has flushed. He must be a devilish good soldier, anyhow!” the Federal went on frankly. “If he can slip us like this, when *not* expected, no use to hunt him—warned and ready—in this darkness. Sound the recall, sir!”

Swinging his lantern high over the underbrush, the captain turned into the woods toward the horseholders without. Suddenly he stopped, peered curiously at a branch before him, and then took carefully from it a drenched, but delicate knot of blue ribbon. A moment he stood, examining the trophy; then he gave a low laugh, that ended in a whistle of humorous amaze. But he put the ribbon in his pocket, without a word, mounted his horse and slowly rode down the road he had come. Suddenly, he turned to Holden, riding on his left grim and silent as a male Sphinx, and asked abruptly:

“Has this bushwhacker a sweetheart about here?”

“I hain’t a-pesterin ’bout gells, be I?” the old man answered, grimly. “But I ’low he do be plum sweet on Freeman’s darter.”

“Where does she live?” the captain asked.

“Twenty mile ’yan; but she’s a-bidin’ now ’long er Sis Hartley, in Gadsding,” Holden answered. “But

wot 'bout her? She hain't no nолledge war her young man be ter night. She hain't seen 'im sence he fool't yer at th' Tenn'see!"

"No, I suppose not," White replied. "Show me Hartley's house, as we pass through Gadsden."

"I ben't 'dvisin', be I?" Holden said, deliberately and grimly. "But he ar' a pizen bad rebel—same ez Freeman. Burnin' ud n't be too good—"

"Shut your mouth, you old reprobate!" The Union soldier turned on the Union sympathizer in wrathful scorn. "How dare you hint that to me, sir! Do you suppose I entered the army to become an incendiary?"

There was no reply to make, so Holden made none; and the party, entering broader road, as the day broke, took the way to Gadsden at a brisk trot. For the trained ear of the Union soldier caught a sound that thrilled him. Either as a signal gun, or as prelude to a fight, a cannon boomed clear but distant.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAPTURED WAR HORSE.

TROTTING rapidly through the sandy main street of the town, the Federal cavalry found the Gadsdenites awake and active, early as was the hour. They peeped from window, or porch, and hung over gates on every side, peering cautiously and curiously at the blue coats, but asking no question. At the Hartley place, the daughter of the house hung over the gate, wide-eyed and eager for news. Her natural anxiety at cannon-firing, with the Federals in sight, was heightened by the strange absence of her friend; for no reply had come to her wondering calls of the previous night, and no solution of Jen's sudden disappearance offered itself to her simple mind.

So Sis Hartley was more curious than alarmed, as the troop trotted down the street and halted in front of her; for Holden—now with his long cloak and white beard and wig, used to conceal his movements from his simple neighbors—had said briefly to the captain:

“Hartley’s; whar his gell ’bides!”

Short time as the cannon shot leaves him, Captain White rides from the front, lifting his cap to the girl as he says, courteously:

"You are no stranger to me, by name, Miss Hartley, 'though I am to you; so I ask the courtesy of a drink of water."

"You're welcome, sir," Sis Hartley answers, with a little tremor; but she never dismounts from the gate, nor lifts the latch, for the enemy. She only calls: "Here, Sal! A bucket an' dipper, quick as you can!"

The Union soldier smiled quietly, under his mustache, at the implied snub; but he threw himself from saddle and approached the gate, followed by the keen, but wondering glance of John Holden. Then in a low voice, he said:

"You are alone, Miss Hartley. Where is your guest, Miss Freeman?"

Sis Hartley's big blue eyes opened wider at this unexpected query, and the wonder in them was emphasized by that in the tone which cried: "Lor! How did you know? Have you any idea where she went last night—" But, suddenly recollecting herself, and to whom she spoke, the girl broke off quickly, finishing with a frigid: "Here's the water, sir! Good-morning."

She turned abruptly, as if to walk away; but the trooper put quick hand into his coat, and flaunting the "knot of ribbon blue" before her, answered:

"How *should* I have any idea, Miss Hartley? Unless—you know this!"

Filled with wonder as was the Gadsden girl's brain, almost equal indignation ranged up in it and formed alongside. Her eyes sparkled with anger; but a tell-tale flush burned in her cheek as she again

turned her back, and strode away without a word. And the captain remounted, well satisfied now about his theory; for, as he rode away, he said to his lieutenant:

"We did not find the rebel, Skinner, but I have found a pretty mountain romance."

But Jen Freeman's knot of blue—and her friend's tell-tale blush—were noted by different eyes, and in different seeming. For John Holden—recalling the parting of the pair, which he had spied upon at Freeman Farm, and now noting the ribbon and the Federal's by-play with it—drew his own conclusions. That they were ugly ones was certain; and that he would make ugly use of them if possible, his hate of Freeman, of the girl, and most of all for Latham, guaranteed beyond all doubt.

* * * * *

And, meanwhile, that gay Confederate ranger had led his men out of the defile, round the plainly noted fires of Streight's command, and was moving into a lower and open road when day broke. Jen looked wearied, but not wholly discontented; and the thought of her lover suggested a halt, and—coffee! A fire soon blazed; tin cups were rinsed at the spring; and soon steaming "potato soup" was ready for the squad and its strange guest.

Then the same cannon Captain White had heard on the Gadsden road boomed clearer and nearer on Latham's ears, and he stopped his gulping at the hot tin cup, as he cried:

"That's Forrest! He is striking the enemy, and there'll be hot work to-day! Ha! there's infantry

fire," he added, after an instant's eager listening, "far to the right; I hear it plainly, where the men are uncovered by the woods. Mount!" he ordered, abruptly. "Miss Jen, I'll find you a horse somewhere, and our road lies near your home! But I dare not leave you, in this uncertain movement of troops. Will you mount behind me; and"—he hesitated an instant, adding—"will you trust me still?"

"I will trust you," the girl answered, firmly, but not letting her eyes meet his. "I would rather take my chances with your men than go on alone, now."

Soon they were trotting rapidly along a new road, that cut directly across the Gadsden pike. An hour brought them to a group of wretched hovels, lately occupied by charcoal burners, but seemingly deserted now. But in front of one of them was hitched a coal black horse, pawing and nickering as the squad advanced up the sandy trail. "U. S." was stamped on saddle and embroidered on shabrac; but, though the letters were unseen at distance, "U. S." stood out unmistakably, from sleek skin and rich accoutrement of the brute. Small time was needed to "cut out" the prize, and strong hands led him away, around a turn that hid from the hastening party the sight of John Holden rushing to the door of the cabin, with wrathful eye and hand raised to curse the bold raider who left him afoot on that day of all days.

Turning from the main road to question one of his Unionist pals as to Forrest's advance, the grim old loyalist had not dreamed of rebel scouts so near. And now, while he fumed in impotent rage and sent

curses after the robber, Beverly Latham was blanketing the saddle, a mile below, and helping Jen Freeman to mount the horse of her unknown foe. For the Virginian had said:

"He's a better beast than mine, Miss Jen, and easier gaited. You are not afraid to ride a Yankee trooper's horse?"

"No, nor any other," the girl had answered, with a confident smile. "Twist that blanket 'horn' a little lower, please. Thank you, Mr. Latham." And, settling herself in her improvised side-saddle, she had given the black his head, had checked him lightly with the curb, dropping it for the snaffle, and was soon galloping by Latham's side, on excellent terms with her new-found mount.

But, as they neared the main road, the sound of cannonading grew louder and more continuous; soon mixed with the constant rattle of small arms; deadened by intervening woods one moment, the next striking sharp and clear upon the ear. So Latham knew that Forrest had struck Streight a heavy blow, that bright summer morning; and, never doubting the result of deliberate blow from that master hand, the young lieutenant groaned in spirit that he was not in the *melée*, yet urged his men forward with every haste possible to soldierly caution. For now the main road was full of Federals,—in parties, or as single stragglers,—hastening to or from the scene of conflict. So the wary scout kept to the side paths, under cover of the heavy growth, the sounds of the battle his only guide.

And gradually these rolled into distance, as Forrest drove his enemy; and it was late afternoon before Latham overtook even the rear of the Confederate force; and learned that the hunted Forrest had the hunter, Streight, well in his toils.

Then, after a few words of encouragement to her, and of careful injunction to the corporal to watch his charge zealously and to hasten for the front, Latham spurred ahead, in the fast falling dusk, to report what he had learned of the Federal disposition.

He found the general's staff on the banks of a swiftly running stream, high over its bounds now, from recent rains; and the commander, slightly advanced from the rest, examining the still blazing bridge, which the Federals had fired as they crossed it.

Sitting his heavy but well-bred horse with the native majesty of command, it needed no rank-marks on his worn gray jacket—no plume or gold cord to his dingy slouched hat—to mark the born leader in Nathan Bedford Forrest.

His great height—six feet two inches, added to by erect seat and firm set of broad, sloping shoulders and deep round chest—Forrest's long muscular limbs, close knit and agile, denoted even greater size. And, as Latham drew rein near by and saluted, the general raised his hat and pushed back—with strong, brown hand, on which the veins stood out like cords—the heavy, dark hair from his moist brow. It was a high, broad forehead, too; whiter than the face below, and retreating almost to baldness above either temple. Broad seams, from constant presence of responsibility, or combination, lined this

forehead; and under its heavy, dark eyebrows, wide set and well arched, the dark, gray eyes, always bright and searching, now literally blazed as they turned in query to the new comer. The full-based nose, with its broad, generous nostrils, gave rather a heavy cast to the sun-browned face; and its high, projecting cheek bones, and thin, firm-set jaws, gave decided Indian cast to the face, save for the black chin whiskers and heavy mustache, that showed the firm lips and regular white teeth only when Forrest spoke.

It was no common face, that of the already famous cavalry leader; but neither was it the face of the thinker, or the astute strategist. Dauntless courage, unswerving resolution, tenacity of purpose and indomitable self-reliance, were all stamped upon it; but the finer and more indefinable character amalgam—which blends all of these and tempers them into the highest forms of greatness—were not so plainly discernible. But there was visible none of that bulldog viciousness and implacable ferocity, which popular misstatement has caused acceptance of, as a real part of Forrest's character.

The general listened restlessly to Latham's brief report; the bullets striking the trees and bank about them, during its making.

"So you've scouted over most of this country, eh?" he said, at its close. "Do you know any ford of this stream within a mile?"

"None, sir. Never had need for one," the youth answered, briefly.

"Know any people around here who do?"

"No, general. Most of the people are disloyal, and even our own sort have fled from the firing!"

"Damn 'em! They should be doing some of it!" the cavalry chief said, half to himself; then suddenly: "Latham, if I can cross this creek, I'll bag the Yankee! and, sir, I *must* cross! Find me a guide!"

A sudden idea leaped into the soldier's eyes. It must have gleamed out of them, even in the dusk; for Forrest's keen glance caught it, as he cried:

"Ho! You know him, do you?"

"Possibly, general, but not—*him!*" Latham faltered out. It had flashed into his brain that Jen Freeman once told him she knew every road and ford and crossing for ten miles round; and Jen Freeman was within hail, so he continued: "If there be a ford any where near, it is probably known to the lady!"

"Lady!" the general echoed. "Is she in reach? A true Southern girl, I'd swear! All right, boy! bring her here!"

"I will, sir!" Latham saluted, touched spur to flank and galloped back toward the rear, through the fast-closing night, leaving Forrest still sitting on the bank, regardless of the pattering bullets and occasional shells about him, as though they had been acorns dropped from the trees above by some playful squirrel.

Suddenly there was a splashing and floundering in the water below him; the bushes parted and a swarthy, semi-nude figure, dripping like a water-dog, approached the general and saluted.

"Well, Johnson, you risked it, did you?" the cavalry chief asked eagerly.

"Yes, general. I swim thar crik, an' floated down a spell. The Yanks ain't movin', but ther pickets is throwed down a mile o' mo'. The' ar a-choppin wood, too; but I could n't find no ford."

"That'll do!" Forrest answered briefly. "Here, major,"—calling to one of his staff, who promptly spurred forward,—“give Johnson a drink, please. Steady, Johnson; you need n't empty the canteen! Major, the enemy will not move off to-night. I will attack him at dawn, if, as I hope, we have found a ford. Order Captain Morton to have his guns ready to command the crossing by dawn, and the company officers to have every man report to his troop, at once."

With these words, Forrest had rejoined his staff, trotted a hundred yards into the woods, and dismounted under a spreading oak. Throwing his waterproof on the ground, he lay upon it at once, and in an instant was sound asleep.

The sun had set in clouds and threatening rain; but later the moon rose mistily through them, showing forms vaguely at some distance. So, when the unusual sight of a tall, graceful girl—galloping upon a coal black war-horse, and escorted by a jaunty young officer—broke upon the eyes of the chief-of-staff, he promptly halted the pair, with gruff inquiry as to their wants. But Forrest, wide awake in an instant, had risen to his feet and now strode forward, raising his hat to the girl, as Latham sprang from saddle and saluted, with the introduction:

"Miss Freeman, General Forrest. The guide, sir!"

"Miss Freeman, I know you're true grit, or you wouldn't be here," Forrest said, bluntly, extending his hand. "I've driven those Yanks all day; but now they've got this crik between us, and I *must* cross! If I do, I'll bag them sure! Do you know a ford near here?"

"Yes, general, I do," the girl answered, calmly.

"You do! That's a dear, good girl! And do you think you can describe it perfectly to me?"

"I can do more than that, sir," she answered, quietly. "I can take you right to it! Come; I'll take you now!"*

"Not just yet, my brave child!" Forrest answered, quietly. "But you shall, just before daylight. Now dismount and rest, as well as you can here. This young man is your friend, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, an old friend," Jen faltered; but she felt her cheeks glow in the darkness of the woods.

"Well, he'll stay with you! Lieutenant Latham, you are appointed special escort to Miss Freeman, and charged with her safety, after we cross! Good-night, Miss. Try and sleep."

Forrest held out his hand frankly again; turned away and threw himself once more on the ground, to sleep. And Latham, carrying the girl back well out of chance range across the creek, helped her from saddle, disposed her as comfortably as possible under a tree, and soon had foraged a comfortable supper for herself and him. The situation was certainly a novel one to both; but there was something in it

*Miss Emma Sanson piloted Forrest across Black Creek Ford, in Streight's raid, 1863.

that neither would have given up for any possible reward. Yet, neither hinted aught of this to the other; and, supper finished, the man suggested sleep for his charge.

"You need rest, after last night's excitement and to-day's fatigue," he said, tenderly. "Please try and sleep, on these blankets. I will stand guard here."

But the girl said sleep could not visit her eyes in such exciting and novel scene; so the youth lit his pipe and sat down for a midnight *tête-à-tête*. Many things they spoke of, and Jen wondered at her lover's truth and self-control—whether she regretted it or not; for never once did he approach forbidden ground, or hint in the least at his passion for her, though he spoke freely and frankly of his debt of gratitude, and of her bravery in her present promise to Forrest.

"For you know, of course, Miss Jen, that this promise you have made the general is not entirely free of danger. You may possibly get under fire."

"Yes, I understand that," she answered, calmly. "But I am not in the least afraid. Even should there be great risk, it is for the cause we both love."

And, gently as she spoke the words, there was a ring in their tone that made Latham sure that her eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed, unseen in the dim light. And under that ring, there was something else in the voice, as it framed the last words, which made his heart jump into his throat. All his self-command was needed, to prevent hot repetition, then and there, of words he had promised not to speak again.

CHAPTER XVI.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

JUST before dawn the woods were as peaceful and still as though no conflict tore the distracted land, and war had never sprung from sown dragon's teeth of pride, or greed, or hate. And now, with the first faint glimmer in the east, comes the soft pipe of matin bird to his mate, the drowsy whirr of early insect, the fresh scent of summer woods—all to speak of peace. But with them come, as quickly, reminders of stern and busy warfare, as squadron after squadron mounts noiselessly and with no sound of trumpet; filing shadow-like through the wooded aisles, toward the indicated ford.

Long preceding them, Captain Morton had moved his artillery down the bank—unlimbered and ready to move by hand, as more noiseless—to command the crossing when the ford was really found.

Then Forrest rode down the bank in shadow of the trees, his face stern set and calm, but his lips closely compressed—the nether one projecting slightly past its fellow. His eyes keen and watchful, but quiet still, scanned the opposite bank for sign of movement, ever and again dropping to the swiftly racing stream, and then rising to the face of Jen Freeman,

who rode by his left side, quiet and unmoved as though on her way to country church.

Passing the battery, the girl checked the eager and rather restive black she rode; and, pointing to the bank, said quietly:

"This is the ford, general."

Forrest looked keenly into her face an instant, not dropping his eyes as he asked:

"Are you certain? Um; I believe you are. How deep is it?"

"Girth deep, now, I judge, sir," the girl answered calmly, measuring the brush on the steep bank. "But the ford is not straight, general. In mid-stream it turns sharp to the left, down stream. There are bad holes, there, to the right."

Forrest bit the end of the tough switch he had broken off, as they rode along. Scanning the racing waters a moment, he muttered, half to himself:

"Um! that's bad. How can I be sure of the spot? One misstep might be fatal."

"I will cross with you, general!"

The words were quietly spoken; no bravado in them, only resolute decision. And Forrest's eyes, flashing a gleam into the girl's, found them calmly bent upon the water, though her face was a trifle paler and the full lips set firm.

"You! Impossible!" he answered, promptly. "They will open fire on us, as soon as we uncover!"

"I expect that," Jen answered, still calmly, but a little whiter now. "I will go over, though. You must not miss the ford."

"You shall, my brave girl!" The cavalry chief reached out his hard hand and grasped the girl's in real comradeship. "If I had a brigade like you, nothing could hold that bank! Lieutenant Latham, keep as near her as the water permits. You are attached to my personal staff, sir, for the present; you cross with us!"

Latham answered by a salute only, but his eyes met Jen's with a world of thankfulness in them, and his cheek flushed warm as he drew closer to her side.

"I brought you into this danger," he whispered, as Forrest turned to give some order. "God grant that it may be averted from you, to me!"

"God grant that it may harm neither of us," the girl whispered solemnly; but she never turned her eyes from the water to his face, though her lips moved slowly, as though in mute prayer.

Dawn began to brighten into a clearer gray, now, as Morton's men shoved his guns silently toward the bank, trained them upon the woods beyond the stream, and primers were shoved home. Behind him the troops massed in the wood; the front squadrons formed in twos, well down to the guns; the reserve deploying into cover, right and left, to support them. Then Forrest drew up to the girl's right again, saluting her with his switch, as he said, gravely:

"I am ready, Miss Freeman! I await your command."

With paler cheeks, but eyes still calmly fixed upon the ford, Jen gripped the reins more firmly in her little hands, settling herself in the improvised saddle. She made no reply but a brief nod, moving promptly

beyond the sheltering trees, down the bank and to the water's edge.

There, with a fierce and sudden snort, the black refused, planting his fore feet on the slippery mud, shivering. Next instant, he shook his great neck fiercely, reared bolt upright, and tried to bolt short to the left. Latham's right hand shot out swiftly for her bit; but the girl's low voice checked him, calling rapidly, but coolly:

"Don't! I can make him!"

And, with the words she jerked the right rein sharply, and the heavy chestnut twig she carried came down twice, heavily, over the black's head. Next instant he had taken to the water, trembling but docile, as he picked careful way into the deeper flood.

And still no sound came from the bank beyond; and Forrest's keen eye, scanning the woods behind it, saw no single sign of life. The very leaves slept still in the breezeless dawn; not a picket was visible; and the camp—known to lie beyond—might have been a veritable "Bivouac of the Dead!" But his keen soldier-sense was not misled by this too-apparent neglect; and the quick glance backward, over his shoulder, had some uneasiness in it. What it took in promptly reassured him. Steadily, quietly, and in unbroken sweep, his squadrons had moved down the bank, entered the stream and were well on to the turn of the ford; while, from the bank behind them, the smooth, youthful face of Captain Morton bent on the vacant and silent rise opposite as though each bush were a battalion; his gunners ready, lanyard in hand!

The crossing was half made, and was well covered; and the Indian face of the cavalry chief glowed with pride in the command he had trusted in so often, and never in vain.

Suddenly the bushes opposite, far to the right, seemed shorn across by a blade of flame, followed by a light-rising puff of cloud; and, ere a sound could reach those in mid-ford, a cannister shot hissed high overhead, followed by another, from the extreme left. Then as pandemonium were suddenly loosed, field piece after field piece belched from the bank, while lines of sheeted fire zig-zagged through the brush lining the lower shore, speaking it populous with sharpshooters.

At the first flash, Forrest had risen in his stirrups and half-turned in saddle, waving the chestnut bough he carried, in signal. Then, as Morton's guns bellowed in reply, he stooped to the girl with quickly spoken words, clearly heard above the din:

"Keep cool, child! Don't lose the ford—now! Forward! Faster!" And, striking her horse sharply with his switch, the seasoned fighter touched his own with the spur; keeping close to her side, but a little in advance, between her and the now fast pattering bullets.

"This way; keep well to the left!" Jen cried, turning down stream a few rods, then sharp to the opposite bank again.

And still above them boomed Morton's guns; steadier now, and faster—sending tearing, crashing messengers into those woods belching fire on them. Rapidly—solemnly—those deadly iron mouths spoke; well trained and telling. And, from the woods

behind and beyond them, a deadly fire poured into the foe that had deemed himself secure. And then, from mid-stream, too, as each squadron turned, following its strange girl guide with the precision of dress parade, carbines came swift to shoulder, to send their compliments to the saucy foe.

Faster and faster the cannon of the Confederates boomed out; sharper and heavier rattled the fire of small arms. And, gradually, that of the Federals slackened—while close in range and churning the fast-rushing stream into foam. Then his cannons silenced; and their dull rumble told they were moving back to higher position; and Forrest—again rising in his stirrups—waved his switch as signal. The last squadrons on the bank dashed into the stream; and, as Jen's now thoroughly excited black struck the bank and scrambled up, the whole command was half crossed, and the ford was won!

Then bugles rang, the rally sounded, and in less time than its telling takes the line of battle formed. And, at the moment, the plunging horses, answering to lash and oath, were dragging Morton's guns across the ford.

Just beyond the river growth spread a broad, level plateau, its edges circled by a heavily timbered rise. And now from this, swept fresh lines of lightning, from cannon mouth and rifle barrel; their ugly messengers singing through the air above or hissing ominously in the ears of the astounded girl.

"Tell Morton to hurry up the guns!" Forrest roared over the din of battle, as he waved the chest-

nut switch above his head and glanced down the line. "Now, boys, *charge!* and give them—"

He paused, his favorite word unuttered. Even at that supreme moment his eye, blazing with the glee of battle, fell upon the girl, and he added: "Quick, Latham! Carry her into cover!"

Next instant he spurred away, leading the squadrons that thundered on behind him to resistless charge! But, even ere he spoke, the younger soldier had leaned over his horse's neck, reaching for the black's bit, as he screamed over the roar of guns:

"Turn, Jen! This way; quick! To the left!"

But the powerful black was on fire now; and, tossing his head fiercely, he threw out his long, corded neck and took the bit. Then, with a trumpet snort, he launched out his heels once, darting away, just beyond the man's reach.

"Hold him!—For God's sake, turn!" Latham again roared, at full power of his lungs. And he dug vicious spurs into his own horse and followed the flying black. And Forrest, a dozen lengths ahead of his line, felt rather than heard the thunder of hoofs close behind; but ere he could turn and then reach out his hand, the black closed on him—then dashed by; frantic now with battle-rage, ungovernable by the slim hands hanging to him bravely, as he raced into the very core of fire—straight for the Federal lines!

But close behind him, plying hand and voice and spur, raced Beverly Latham; his lips white, but set and stern, his eyes riveted on the slim, erect figure careering so swiftly to capture, or—death!

Jen Freeman, dizzy but exultant with strange excitement, clung firmly to her seat, steadying the powerful head she could not control. The sounds about her ears were new and awful; "sing" of shot and "whoo!" of shell—cut by the dull "pung!" or sharp, agonizing cry, as bullets met resisting flesh and bone!

But the girl was not afraid. With no time to think, even to recall where she was, her instinct told her that her horse was running away; that she was in deadly peril each moment! that death might come the next! Yet her cheeks glowed and her eyes gleamed, as they had not in the cautious passage of the ford; and a whirling, delirious sense that was a sort of joy, mounted to her brain. She was far ahead of the advancing line, her horse gaining at every bound; but she sat erect upon that rough saddle, clinging to the bit that he obeyed not, in very ecstasy of excitement!

Suddenly she felt a jolting jar, a break in his stride, as the gallant brute fell to his knees—rose again, quivering—staggered one stride—plunged heavily forward—then rolled over on his side! But—at the moment—she felt also a rough shock, a violent sweep to one side, a close and almost stifling pressure, that seemed to tear her through the air.

Then quick revulsion came; she grew cold, limp, sick, almost losing consciousness. For agonized, remorseful, chilled by dread as he was, Beverly Latham still retained the coolness of a mind bent upon one object only. Unmindful of shot and shell—with his eyes riveted only upon the loved form

before him flying into the jaws of death, he urged his own horse by voice and knee and cruel use of spur. For a while he hung close to the black's flank; then, with a heart growing cold from despair, he felt himself losing ground at every jump. Then his practiced eye, riveted upon the chase, saw the shock that almost halted the black; the shivering stumble—the supreme effort. He knew a ball had pierced the horse's breast; and with a gasp he closed his eyes, as he swept on—mechanically driving both spurs fiercely home.

But, opening them instantly, the intuition of love showed him the girl erect—unhurt; and setting his teeth and drawing a great breath, he braced himself in saddle—launched out his strong right arm, as he passed in full career—and tore her from the saddle, just in time!

Over rolled the great black horse, with shuddering kicks—deadly—terrible!

Past swept the pursuing rider; panting, breathless, straining every nerve; but with heart bursting with joy. For with him he bore the precious freight of her he loved—as he knew now—better than his own life; and—saved by him!

Quickly he checked his flying horse; the bullets singing close by his ears, whooping shells filling the sky above him with dread warnings.

One supreme effort of strength, and the girl was raised before him, both his arms supporting her upon the pommel, as he wheeled and fled for *her* life, back to meet the charge. And those thundering squadrons—sweeping down upon him without break or gap,

with never a shot breaking the terrific power of their onset—opened, swept by, and closed again behind him; a wild yell—ringing—exulting—terrible to hear, surging their pæan for his act!

And, ere the line had opened, the tall, grim warrior form leading it had dashed by, the gladiator gleam red in his eyes, the chestnut switch lashing the air aloft, the firm lips set in iron rigor. But they opened, even then; and over shot and shell—over thunder of hoof and above the rebel yell, Latham heard his heart bound as he caught the brief words:

“Well done, sir!”

CHAPTER XVII.

PARTING.

The tide of battle swept into the circling woods; through them—beyond! Shot and crash and shout resounded fainter now; almost dying in the distance. And in a little glade aside, protected by thick growth, Latham stood still; breathless, with beads of moisture on his bare brow, but well content indeed. For, still resting against his arm, Jen Freeman stood, panting and dizzy, but with red lips and cheeks still glowing with color.

Dazed and somewhat dizzy, the girl was not of the sort that faints to express its feelings; and, a brief moment after being lifted from his horse, she relieved her escort of her light—and much regretted—weight.

“What was it all?” she said, dizzily. “Tell me; I do not understand!”

“It was nothing, thank God!” he answered fervently. “Your horse—a Yankee capture—ran away. You were—”

“Yes! Now I remember!” She raised her eyes full to his; gentle, dim with feeling, but brave and true. “Oh! Mr. Latham, how can I thank you! You saved my life!”

"Oh, no! Miss Jen. I only helped you up when your horse fell," the man tried to say quietly; but his cheeks burned red and his breath came fast and short, under her glance and her tender tone. "It was risky; but, thank Heaven! you are safe now."

"Yes; thank Heaven—and *you!*" she persisted. But this time she did not look at him; and the color faded out of her cheek. Then, sudden revulsion of feeling played upon her tense strung nerves; and with a little shudder she cried:

"Oh! what *have* I done! So bold—so unmaidenly. *Please*, Mr. Latham, get me away from here! *Please* take me home!"

"Surely I will, Miss Jen, just as soon as it is safe," he answered. "But, what have you done? Why; the grandest, bravest, truest act a woman ever did! You are a little hero!"

"I have no ambition for that," she answered, again shuddering. "I must seem bold—unwomanly to them and—*you!* Can we not get away?—get home?"

"In a little while," he answered, soothingly. "Listen! The bugle sounds the recall! Forrest has driven them! *You* led us to victory!"

"It was terrible!" was all her answer; and she pressed her hands over her eyes, as though to shut out a suddenly vivid memory.

Latham made no answer; stepping out into the open and sweeping the field in quest of news. Far, above the fringe of trees a faint blue cloud of smoke hovered, low and light. A bugle cut the stillness, answered from the field beyond him by a groan, or

the human cry of a wounded horse; while here and there lay stiff, still forms of what had late been men; and scattered arms and blankets—hats and canteens dotted the torn and trampled earth. Riderless horses trotted toward him, neighing pitifully; only to dart away at a word, kicking and terrified. And, high above his head, in the clear morning sunshine, floated and sailed dim, circling specks, scarcely recognizable. But the soldier knew they were the grimest followers of battle; those feathered Valkyrie that scent it afar off, now hastening to their dreadful feast—spread for them by the hands of man himself!

With grave face and set lips the young soldier turned to re-enter the copse; suddenly checking himself, and striding into the field again. A riderless horse had begun to graze, and the trooper approached him cautiously. But the beast did not attempt escape; only nickered and looked up, again dropping his head to graze. And then he saw that the bridle was held by a man, stretched prone upon the field, doubtless badly hurt. Breaking into a run, Latham was soon bending over him; but the glassy, open eyes stared at the sun unblinking, and the hand that clinched the rein so vise-like was stiff and cold; for life had swiftly gone out through that gaping portal, torn in his chest by fragment of a shell.

"Poor fellow!" he said, aloud, as he gazed down on the dead man; adding with a sigh: "I wonder which of us is happier!"

Then he forced open the stiff, resisting fingers, threw the bridle over the horse's neck and, mounting

quickly, trotted toward the cover, just as an officer galloped at speed from the trees beyond. It was a major of Forrest's staff, and he overtook the lieutenant and hailed, just as he entered the cover:

"Are you Lieutenant Latham? Ah, I see. Where is the lady?"

"Just in here, sir," Latham saluted, and led the way, "and perfectly safe, I'm glad to say."

"Delighted to hear it," the major answered heartily, as he alighted near Jen and bared his head. "So will the general be, Miss Freeman. He was very anxious about you, and bade me ride fast and find you certainly."

"You are both very good," Jen said, with lowered eyes. "Please thank General Forrest for me."

"Not at all, miss," the soldier answered. "Streight has sent in a flag of truce. We have driven him into a corner; and I think he will surrender. This success the general feels is largely due to your courage and heroism, Miss Freeman. He asks you to ride to headquarters that he may thank you in person, before the troops!"

"Oh! no—no!—no!" Jen cried, with almost a sob. "Oh! I *could* not! I have done nothing at all; and I have seen too much of this already! I am heartsick from thinking of the poor killed and wounded men! Oh, sir! I only wish to get away—to get home! There is a road beyond this which will take me there. Oh! please let me go; and tell the general why."

"Certainly, Miss Freeman, if you wish," the major said, gallantly. "The loss will be the general's, that

I must thank you for him, cordially—sincerely and in the name of Forrest's corps!" He held out his hand; the trembling girl placed hers in it, with a faint smile on her lips. And the soldier bent his bared head, and pressed his lips upon the slim brown fingers with the same reverence as they had worn the gleaming signet of an empress.

"Mr. Latham," he added, "you can escort Miss Freeman home. Report to the general when you have seen her safely there. Good-bye, Miss Freeman. Rest assured that Forrest's men will never forget you!"

"Heaven grant they may!" the girl cried with more fervor than tact, as a deep blush overspread her face—"Oh! sir, *please* ask the general never to mention my name to anyone. And please ask the staff! I so dread being known in this!"

The soldier's face spoke strong amazement; but his disciplined lips only formed the words:

"Your wishes shall be sacred, miss."

He again raised his cap, saluted Latham and rode away; and the young man, arranging his saddle as best he could, said:

"You had better ride my horse, Miss Jen. He is quieter than the dea—the trooper's. When you rest a while, we will start."

"No, now," the girl said, impatiently. "I am rested, and I long to get away from here—home. Oh! what a dreadful thing war is!"

They rode through the bright, scented woods—vocal with bird songs and chirp of insect—almost in silence for several miles. For Jen seemed lost in

thought, her head bowed and her eyes upon her horse's mane; and Latham's heart was too full of her for him to speak on any theme but one—and that one forbidden equally by her mandate and by that of his own self-respect.

At last they reached the broad highway; a mile only separating the girl from the haven of her own home, so longed for now. Then she drew rein and said:

"We must part now, Mr. Latham. I must go home alone, and explain it all as best I can. Oh! if you could know how ashamed I feel of my bold, unwomanly conduct! How can I explain to papa my presence in Forrest's army and how—how I got there! How can I explain to Sis how I left her house—alone and at midnight—to—to—"

"To do the most heroic thing!" he broke in impetuously. "To sacrifice your own feelings—to risk your life, to save your—friend! God only knows, Jen Freeman, how I feel the greatness of your deed that night. You know too well what I felt for you before! You know my life was yours before; and now it is doubly yours!"

"Hush! You must not speak so," she said, very low; her head still bowed and her eyes not raised. "You must go now. Good-bye! I will always remember you—as my friend!"

"And is that all you will say to me, Jen?" he urged, feeling sweeping his resolve aside. "You know I love you; we are parting, perhaps forever; you know I owe my life to you, and you will not let my love—my gratitude—"

"I do not want your gratitude," she answered, more coldly. "You owe me nothing but—what you pledged—your friendship!"

"And that is all you will say? All you will let me hope?" he pleaded.

"It is all I *can* say," she answered, very low, but very firmly. "It is what you should hope I would say. Let us be friends, Mr. Latham; and God—who spared me to-day—knows I am a true one to you. You yourself said, 'This war cannot last always.' When it is over—perhaps long before it is over—you will have forgotten a wish impelled by fancy, or by—gratitude."

"It is not!" he cried, warmly. "You are the bravest, best woman I have ever known—so different from them all!"

"So different, indeed!" she said, sadly, her head bowing lower. "Being so now, with all the glamor of the recent past, I would be more different still, when novelty was over and time had done its work."

"And you will not let my gratitude—"

"No!" she broke in; and for the first time her eyes met his. "I tell you I want no gratitude! You deceive yourself, Mr. Latham; and I will not aid you! You owe me nothing—but friendship," she finished, more gently.

"Not when you nursed me back to health? Not when you risked your life, in danger and at midnight, to save mine?"

Her eyes never left his face, nor did hers grow paler as she spoke; but a something he could not read passed over it as she answered quietly:

“Granting both, one hour ago you saved me from a hideous—unwomanly—death, at deadly peril to yourself. If you insist upon the score of gratitude, Mr. Latham. I am still your debtor.”

“Jen! you *will* say nothing more?”

“I *can* say nothing more,” she repeated, her eyes bent down again. “In a little while, you will thank me that I—did not. And now, God bless and guard you, my friend! Good-bye!”

She held out her hand; not raising her eyes. If he saw the movement, she did not know; for she could not see the color fall out of the man’s cheeks, as he opened his lips to reply. But no word passed them; an angry flush mounting to his face and an ugly gleam of mortified pride creeping into the eyes that he fixed upon her one instant. The next, he wheeled his horse abruptly, dug both spurs home, and lifted his cap stiffly, as he bounded away, with the cold farewell:

“Good-day, Miss Freeman!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN INTERRUPTED LYNCHING.

SIS HARTLEY was sorely perturbed in spirit; for that young lady was a belle in her own right, and was thoroughly spoiled at home besides. In her small mountain flirtations, which were numerous, she had ever taken counsel with Jen Freeman; not confessing to herself that she looked up to, and relied upon, the stronger character and native dignity of her life-long playmate and late co-graduate in Nashville "finish." And in more serious or practical matters she relied wholly on her male parent—"popper" as she called him; her mother being a weakling in spirit and more so in flesh, racked long by mountain rheumatism.

But in present perturbation, both props were swept from Miss Hartley; and she floundered helplessly, and almost hopelessly, in the slough of despond. For the first time in her life, she confessed she "never could make out Jen Freeman;" and now doubt began to creep over incapacity. She had passed a restless night, after at last giving up hope of Jen's return on the eve of the battle; and late watch—as has been seen—did not prevent her rising with dawn, for its renewal. Creeping down to the

road at earliest hint of daylight, she leaned over the gate to question the first moving passer. Then she saw a weakly toiling woman moving slowly down the way, seemingly worn by a long tramp, but ever glancing furtively behind her, as in fear of some dreaded object in pursuit. The woman shuffled on hastily, not raising her head until Sis hailed her, just at the gate. Then she started guiltily, looked cautiously behind and around her, mumbling only the one word: "'Morn'n'!" as she passed.

"Why, Lize Holden!" the other cried. "You're out early, to look so tired. Stop a while and rest."

"I hez no time ter rest," the widow whined, nervously. "I mus' git hum—er he'll know't!"

She started off again, just as the signal cannon broke the dawn's stillness, its echo halting her and forcing the cry:

"Gawd help 'er! I du hope, Miss Jen ben't thar yit!"

"Jen Freeman? What do you know of her? Where is she, Lize?" the girl cried, running after the woman and seizing her arm.

"I hezn't sed as I knowed, hez I?" was the indirect reply. "But I low she ar' safe 'long ov 'im!"

"Him!" Sis echoed the pronoun personal, wide-eyed with wonder. But the woman, nodding her head and giving her yellow smile, suddenly broke away from Sis and started to run feebly down the road. Her terror-quicken sense caught, before the girl's, the tramp of coming hoofs; and the first law of nature impelled her to flight and hiding from "paw."

“Stop!” Sis cried. “Where is Jen?”

But Lize fled away, crying over her shoulder:

“She ben’t dangerin’ none, ’long ov her yung man!
Th’ soljer ’ll look out fur his gell!”

And she plunged into the woods, as the hoofs sounded nearer; leaving Sis, dismayed and wondering, to re-enter her gate and mount guard upon it. Nor did the quick following colloquy with the Federal captain aid solution of the now deep mystery; and all that day wonder about it divided her interest in the battle, raging long and loud within hearing distance. For, to her many confidences Jen had never responded in kind, having none to give. And Sis had only known casually that a wounded Confederate had been nursed at Freeman; Farm but had suspected no romance. And it could not be he, she reasoned; for the Federal captain had the ribbon Jen had worn when she disappeared. A good looking Yank, too; with very pleasant manners—a perfect gentleman, Sis paused to recall. But, even her romantic nature could not connect so loyal a rebel—so modest and sensible a woman—as Jen Freeman in clandestine flirtation with a foe to her country and her race! So Sis thought so steadily that unaccustomed strain made her head ache; that made her seek solace in the feminine panacea, a flood of tears; but finding the solace lacking there, Sis closed her swollen eyes to think again—falling sound asleep in five minutes.

Later she silenced her father’s query for Jen by an oracular, but positive, reply that, “She’s safe all right.” But her own wonder grew; and the doubts.

began to grow with them. A messenger sent to Freeman Farm, the morning after the battle, returned with a verbal message that Jen was safe at home, but not yet awake after her long journey around the fighting of the previous day. So Sis, still wondering,—still bravely fighting doubts,—resolved loyally to give her friend all benefit of them, until she had “a good, long talk,” and that at the earliest opportunity.

And Jen Freeman’s gentle spirit, too, was racked by doubts and forebodings; based on better grounds, perhaps, than those of her friend. For the first time in her life, she had a feeling unshared by her idolized father; and, worse, a secret that must be kept from him, at all hazards. And, to the truthful nature, evasion ever seems the suggestion of untruth; oftentimes forced—by circumstances of its own creation—to seek refuge behind a silence that is but prevarication. And to this girl’s nature—truthful, frank and open beyond most women’s—the present need of caution and of watchful mood grew almost unbearable from the first hour it was recognized. But she suffered in silence, more for her father’s sake than her own; praying ceaselessly—hoping almost against hope and reason—that the unexpected might happen, and relieve her of fast-growing self contempt.

Reaching her own gate, after the fight she had led, Jen was welcomed by no horn-blast; for her father, young brother and every whole man on the place, were absent. The one-legged veteran at the gate told her briefly of the morning’s fight, following that of the previous day so close to the farm; and that all hands

were in the bottom, hiding stock and meat from Confederate stragglers, or possible Federal victors. And, for once in her life, the girl felt deep relief at her father's absence. It gave her more time to collect her surprised senses, and to formulate her course of action, under new and bitter conditions now arisen; so, seeking her own room, she vainly tried to sleep and rest from the wearing strain of the two past days. Exhausted nature had conquered at last; and Jen was in feverish and fitful sleep, when her father's kiss aroused her suddenly.

"God bless you, my child!" the farmer said, fervently. "I thought you safe at Hartley's; but, since Forrest is driving them that way, you are better at home. But how in the world did you get back? I saw the strange horse at the barn; tell me all about it."

Briefly, but with burning cheeks, Jen narrated the bare facts of her eager desire to reach home; of a stray horse, given her by a trooper; of her weariness and need of rest, before further details. The farmer kissed her—so tenderly that the girl turned away, sobbing with compunction—as he answered:

"Yes, my little girl. You *are* worn out. Go to sleep now; and, soon as Willie comes, I'll send word to Hartley. They must be anxious for your safety; but I wonder he let you come alone, in such dangerous times!"

"He was absent from home, papa!" Jen answered hastily. "Please never breathe one word to him about it! Promise me, papa! and I will write to Sis myself!"

Of course the farmer promised; Jen scribbled a brief line to Sis, that she was at home and safe; and the trusting parent sent the note.

She had broken the ice, Jen felt, but she shivered as she saw that the water beyond was dark and strange and of unknown depth. For two days, she moved about the house like a guilty thing, really avoiding her father—who, fortunately, was very busy returning his stock and stores from their hiding places. She made constant work for herself, striving to force busy hands to ease the too-busy brain; and—hating herself the while—she fully resolved that her father should never know. For,—even while his pride and patriotism might condone the rash boldness of her escapade with Forrest,—how could she ever explain the midnight jaunt which alone could excuse her presence there? And, trusting her father's great love as she really did, something deep in her heart shrunk from the baring of itself, even to his eye; and she vainly strove to hide it even from herself. No! She *could* not—*would* not explain! Papa must be content with what vague tale she had told; must trust her still, through love, as she felt he would.

But, through that very love, the father's eyes grew clearer, and their ceaseless, while furtive, watch of his darling's face told him that some hidden sorrow weighed upon her; that, for the first time, a secret had risen between them. But the tenderness of that love, and the perfection of his confidence in her, forbade question as to what was not spontaneously given him; and the farmer only shook his head and sighed, as he puffed his evening pipe alone upon

the gallery, while Jen's self-imposed duties kept her within. If his loyal affection caused suspicion that her changed manner, absent moodiness and evident effort to be her old self were born of memory of the absent young soldier, no such hint ever escaped lips that the sturdy old man coerced from barest allusion to any topic, save the few that Jen now broached to him, of her own will.

Rumor, whom the ancients pictured with a hundred tongues, should have been limbed with quite as many legs as well. For—now as in those primitive days—evil report runs with a swiftness that contradiction may never overtake; and, once started on its course, willing tongues and attent ears aid its rapid route to mischief and to ruin! Nor was the primitive neighborhood of Freeman Farm exempt from germs of this all-pervading scourge; and now vague hints began to fly through its pure air; soon clinging to some slender fiber of fact and growing rapidly in evil, dangerous bulk.

It was yet too early—and the pursuit by Forrest of his flying foe had been too swift and too far beyond—for any truth of his girl-guide's heroism to have reached the quiet farm. But gossips had flocked into Gadsden, eager for news and ready to barter all sorts and qualities of that commodity; and Squire Hartley's store—the largest and most popular there—was favorite "'Change" for this traffic. And there, already a subject of frequent guess and query, was the fact of a young woman's riding through the soldier-crowded roads, along with a Confederate force; and country *quid-nuncs* were all agog to know

if they were one and the same person, when at last the story of the ford—and of the decisive charge—began to float back from the now triumphant army, and to take somewhat the actual form of truth.

Cautious, taciturn, but keener than ever in his relentless and malignant hate—John Holden fanned the rising flame of curious query by chance-dropped word of his own; more by grave hint and ugly innuendo, through such secret emissaries as he used—either because of their loyalty to the Union, or from personal fear of himself—to gather and to carry the more serious news of his self-imposed vocation. For now, in the lull of battle—and while its eastern current had drawn away all of his armed enemies and well-watched foes—the old man's venom rusted in its sheath, growing more acid and eating out on the smaller means of harassing and hurting those placed under his far reaching ban.

To what was ingrained principle, recent defeat and disappointment added personal spite; and—perhaps dominating both—ever rose in his heart the bitter, stern cry for vengeance in Hank's name; the iteration of that oath for blood and ruin on them all, seared into his hard soul, by failure so far, only the deeper and more ineffaceable!

From his disguise at Hartley's gate the old man had watched White's interview with Sis; had heard his mention of Jen Freeman's name; had seen the blue ribbon and quickly recognized—from rarity of such luxuries then—the one he had seen Jen divide with her rebel lover. Habit, rather than expected usefulness, had made him note these seeming trifles;



“NOW, MR. STOREKEEPER, WHAT ARE YOUR PROOFS AGAINST THIS SPY?”—Page 231.

but—when the rumors of a woman raider grew rife; when the story of the girl-guide began to float back from the army—then Holden patched his broken web anew; cementing it by spied-for certainty that the girl had left Hartley's house mysteriously, and had ridden home alone. So, within a week from Jen's disappearance and Sis Hartley's wild cries through the night, rumor was rife on the mountain, that the farmer's envied daughter had done some terrible thing; but, what it was few took pains to ask—fewer still cared to know—as all nodded, and winked, and hinted that it was more hideous than any fact could possibly have been. And John Holden's tireless hate softly drew together the fibers of his mesh, ready to catch the fair fame of the girl, should it "'scape calumny."

"I ben't a saint, be I? Tha's his en'mies an' mine, no differ!" he growled to himself, as he strode over the Gadsden pike, his head thrust forward and his green eyes glowing red, as he brooded on his wrongs. "I hez n't kep' m' yoath ter full yit; but I 'low I will, jes' ez sho' ez ther Lord sets thar! Them ole Jews hed ther right, w'en tha' sed, 'Eye fur eye, tooth fur tooth an' blood fur blood!' John Holden kin wait; but he hain't shed ov his yoath, s' long ez tha's peaceful an' content, yan!"—He halted, raising his hand in malediction toward Freeman Farm.—"A nice gell! A fine darter fur thet proud rebel! ter be ridin' roun' th' critter camps an' spendin' nights frum home! I hed ter lie ter thet soljer, 'bout her doins' afore; but I lied fur ther Lord's work, ter smite his foes! But, nex' time, ther' 'll be no need ter lie, fur

th' truth are wust—wust! Now ther blow 'll fall an' strike dad an' darter and sweet'art, all ter wunst!"

And, again raising his hand with fanatic hate, the Unionist strode faster to the town, and through it to Hartley's store. This was what is still known, in Southern interior towns, as a "general merchandise" store. Now furnishing a little of anything that promises a profit—from a paper of tacks to a plow; a paper collar to a set of harness; a single egg to a cask of bacon; or a sometimes surreptitious black bottle—the "general store" of the war days, had added usefulness of arms, ammunition and household needs, of every variety possible to the commerce of the blockade, or of the country-side. And, not least, it was the gathering place for gossips far and near; especially those male ones, who—in primitive country, no less than busy city—can give the long odds, and then win, from their sisters in social sin!

This chanced to be a "field day" at Hartley's store, and an unusual crowd had gathered. Mainly composed of old men, disabled "dischargers", and loutish youths under age, there were also several soldiers in gray, hurt slightly in the recent fights and left to follow on foot, as best they might, to relieve the ambulances in forced march. And the theme of every tongue was the victory; of course, not omitting that mysterious appearance of a mountain Jeanne d' Arc, to pilot Forrest.

"I swar ter grayshus! et do beat all!" The orator was a florid and flabby citizen, exempt by grace of surgeon's certificate. "But thet air gell cert'ly did hev spunk!"

"She cert'ly hed it, sho!" murmured a chorus.

"She hed spunk, sho," reiterated a soldier, with a fresh patch across his cheek. "Them bullets hev flew thick'r'n gnats."

"I hez n't seed her," confirmed an apparently whole comrade, squirting a dark stream of tobacco juice beyond the doorsill, "but I do 'low she hed spunk!"

"Pre'ps she hev hed mo' ov spunk then she war modis', Joe," a venerable old man piped. "Ef she war layin' roun' camps, *I* 'low she hain't got no disscreshun."

"It don' mek no differ, do it?" John Holden put in, grimly. "Mennyer gell hea'bouts gits 'long po'ful well 'thout no disscreshun."

"Hole up, pardner," the tall soldier retorted. "En Nor' Klina, we 'uns doan' jaw 'gin our 'oomen!"

"Naw; nur en Gorgie, nuther!" added a second.

"She helpt ter lick ther Yanks, an' yer hed 'orter shame ter 'buse 'er!" added a third.

"Pre'ps John Holden hain't thenkin' her fur thet," piped the old man; going with the turn of the tide in natural fashion.

"I hezn't 'bused 'er, hez I?" Holden answered, grimly. "Ef I be thankin' er, don' mek no differ. I 'low mabbe she *hez* dun no mo' than other gells, 'roun yere!"

Grave, deliberate and cool, the speaker dropped his words slowly—sending the four last full at Hartley, as he turned from nailing a box, hatchet in hand.

"What in the devil do you mean?" the squire asked, gruffly. He never had liked Holden, knowing his

Union sentiments, and more than half suspecting the nefarious use he made of them at times. "A man of your age can do better things than slander his country women!"

A growl of approving assent came from the crowd; but Holden—not moving a muscle—kept his eyes full on Hartley's face, though he spoke to the others:

"I hez heer'd that a yung 'ooman, you 'uns all know, hev been a-ridin' ther same critter ez a young soljer, 'roun yere; an' thet 'fore morn war broke, too."

A murmur of dissenting query ran round the group, the tall soldier saying to his mate:

"That trooper hed pie, sho'. But this yer ole devvle's tongue's bitter 'r'n 'simmons 'fore fross'!"

"Le'ss we 'uns shet up his darn'd ole head, Joe!" responded his mate, reaching for a near axe-helve; but Hartley's voice broke in angrily:

"Holden, you must stop this kind o' talk, under my roof! You've gone far enough. Damn! you're bad as any old woman at her dip!"

A grim twitch—that was anything but a smile—contorted the old man's lips, and an ugly, menacing gleam rose in the eyes, still fixed on Hartley. But, for sole answer, he folded his long arms across his breast, strode out of the store across the road, to a great chestnut-oak standing there; and placed his broad back against it:

"It don' mek no differ whar ther truth ez spoke," he then said, slowly, deliberately, but with the evil glint growing in his eyes. "An' tha' do say, Squire

Hartley, thet yer own gell knows thet ar yung 'ooman well!"

"You lie! you venomous old traitor!" the irate father cried, rushing to the street with the hatchet raised in his hand. But some one grasped it and the crowd surged between, as he went on: "You deserve to be killed—lying about women!"

Holden stood calm and erect, never blenching under the now hostile looks of them all, as he answered, slowly:

"Squire Hartley, ef I be a-lyin', axe yer own darter!"

"You lie! I say," Hartley shouted, struggling to get free. "No wonder you lie about women, you old traitor! I believe you spy on our army! You deserve to be hung!"

Again the twitch came to Holden's lips one instant; the next they set hard and sneering as he cried:

"Hung, ez it? Tha's 'low'd *thet* 'afore! Thet's wot ther sesesh 'lowed in ther Cornvenshun nigh three year gone! But John Holden hain't heng yit, hez he? Wot he sed then, he'll say no differ now! He'll stan' by 's word!"

"You double traitor!" yelled the strugglingsquire. "He'd ought'er be lynched! Had n't he, boys?"

A crowd of excited men is ever strangely sensitive, swaying from one impulse to its opposite, often without any cause. But now there was cause enough; and Hartley's cry lit to full blaze the smouldering fire, already gaining headway among those half-savage natures.

"Lynch him!" "The damned traitor!" "Hang the spy!" echoed from them; and—ever prompt in suiting ugly action to evil word—the mountaineers grasped axe-helve, gun, hatchet, as was nearest at hand, surging out into the road. The soldier, Joe, reaching his long arm for a coil of cotton rope, was coolly loosing its end as he went. And still—with back against the tree, arms folded and his eyes the only moving thing about him—John Holden stood as quietly as though at prayer-meeting.

"Gie us th' word, squire, an' we'll hist him, quicker'n wink!" Joe said, in business-like way, and ejecting another flood of tobacco-juice.

"Kill the spy!"—"Hang him!"—"Come, boys!" growled the crowd, moving to mid-road, ready for a rush. And still Holden stood motionless; but now he spoke in deep, deliberate voice, but vibrant with contempt:

"Gie th' wurd, Bill Hartley—ef yer' dar! Liff han' ter tech John Holden, ef yer hez ther spunk, ye' barkin' cur-dogs! Like he do be ole, but he haint a-fearin' ther hull of sech ez you 'uns! He *kin* 'low ther's spunk en ther rebels wot fights ter ther frunt! But he jes' spits on sech ez hangs 'hind, an' sick's 'em on!" He raised his hand high above his head; no menace, only full conviction in the gesture, as he added: "John Holden laffs at you 'uns! He's in ther han' ov ther Lord!"

An ugly growl, rising into a fierce yell, ran along the crowd, as Hartley broke through and headed the now blood-hungry crew. But, just as it crouched for fatal spring upon the quarry, hoofs beat the road-

way and a galloping horse dashed into the space between.

"Halt! Stand ready, men! Drop your hands, you cowardly skulkers!" rang the voice of habitual command. And the rider threw his horse almost on his haunches, as the ready revolver clicked, in the sudden stillness.

With the instinct of discipline, the soldiers—whole men and crippled alike—dropped hands and stood at "attention!" And the civilians—following example of the flabby exempt—essayed to slip back into the store. But they halted at the order:

"Steady! As you were, till I find the cause of this disturbance."

"Cause enough, soldier!" gruffly answered Hartley, the only one who stood his ground. "Defaming our women, by that spy there! Who are you, anyway, ordering us 'round?"

"Captain Beverly Latham, of General Forrest's staff, sent to the rear to hurry up all stragglers," was the airy reply. "It seems I am fortunate, here. Men, move to your commands at once! The one who is in town to-night, without surgeon's certificate, will answer for it! Now, Mr. Storekeeper, what are your proofs against this spy? Where is he?" He turned in saddle as he spoke, and a low whistle of surprise escaped his lips, ere they added lightly: "You? my venerable Arab! By Jove! the Yanks pick old ones for such active service! Why, man, your neighbors seem to relish your Union preaching less than I did. But, I was in time, luckily." He turned to Hartley, with changed manner: "Well,

sir, have you any specific charges against this man, Holden? Any proofs that he is a spy?"

A grumbling assent came from the civilians, already deserted by the soldier element; but Hartley—once more himself, and rather ashamed of his ugly situation—answered that there was no proof; and no charge, further than the man's openly avowed Union sentiments.

"I scarcely think the general would approve your hanging a non-combatant for that," Latham replied.

"But, captain, he villified our wives and daughters; some of them, I believe, known to you," Hartley urged in extenuation.

If Latham caught the hint, he showed not sign, even to the watchful eye of Holden, eagerly noting the words of one of his enemies to the other. He only turned, saying lightly:

"That is most ungallant, Mr. Holden, even for a man of your years. I believe I have saved your precious neck a stretching this time; so we're quits on the salt question, till—next time! So, you'd better pack off home, before I recall your bad marksmanship, a certain night not long ago!" He turned to the others; the smile dying on lips, that set in stern command: "For the rest of you, stay-at-homes,—remember! We'll do the fighting for you; but General Forrest can take care of his rear, and hold his own courts-martial. Another disgraceful scene like this may be bad for your town. You are Mr. Bill Hartley? Very well; you seem to lead these men. The general will hold you responsible for their future conduct!"

He dropped his pistol back in holster; gathered his horse and trotted away; twirling his mustache with his freed hand. And Holden—never moving from the tree, seemed to forget more recent and dangerous foes; his stare riveted on the young officer from his first word—turned his face to follow him;

And his eyes had a'll the seeming
Of a demon's that is dreaming,

as their red glow deepened under the blast of a hate, only hotter for delay in the ordained accomplishment of its undying purpose. Still standing, lone and motionless, after the crowd had scattered and disappeared, John Holden seemed suddenly to awake, with a start. Then, taking a deep breath, he strode slowly away, not casting one glance at the lair of his late assailants. But his head was bent forward and his lips were forming the words:

“His time hez not yit cum; but it’ull cum, sho’. I hed rether’r a-resked ’em all, than ter hed ’em ’fear’d ’long ov *him*! But, I’ll pay him fur this too, wen his time shell cum; fur he ar’ in ther han’s ov ther Lord,—an’ He hev heer’d my yoath!”

CHAPTER XIX.

WOMAN AND GIRL.

"You grand, brave, misunderstood dear! I'll stand up for you, if the whole world turned against us! But, you're right, Jen; you *can't* tell your popper!"

And with these staunch, but somewhat conflicting words, Sis Hartley threw her arms about her friend and gave her a genuine, old-fashioned hug. The two girls were closeted in Jen Freeman's room, the morning succeeding the baffled attempt at lynching; Miss Hartley's advent having been preceded by a brief, but alarming note, the evening previous. The farmer had ridden away, happily thus giving no cause for entangling explanations; and, promptly led into Jen's own apartment, Sis had said, bluntly:

"Guess you know, Jen, that folks are mighty busy talking about us, don't you?"

"Not about you, Sis; but I fear they are talking somewhat about me."

"Somewhat? Well, a little!" Sis replied, with fine irony. "But I just tell you, Jen, that I don't know what you've really done, but I'm just sure you had good reason for it."

"Thank you, Sis, I believe I had," Jen answered,

quietly; but her eyes grew moist as she leaned over and kissed her friend gratefully.

"Well, I've got lots to tell you," Sis went on, hurrying over her unpleasant, but self-imposed duty. "And I've some things to ask you, which you can answer or let alone, as you please."

"Go on," Jen answered, rather faintly.

"Well, dear, you must know that some nasty busy-body—though I can't for the life of me see why *you* should have an enemy in all the world—has been spreading reports to hurt your reputation!"

"My reputation!" Jen started up with cheeks aflame.

Sis nodded, decisively: "But don't worry, Jen! I'll stand by you. I don't want to hurt you, dear, but it's best you should know. Isn't it?"

"Go on, I trust you, Sis!" Jen sat down on the little white bed again, slipping her hand into the other girl's. "You will believe me, when I say I have done nothing that would justify—that!"

"I believe you, Jen, dear! But two heads are better than one," the other answered; and she went on—"not wisely but too well," perhaps—to detail the strange, vague talk, the condensation of vapory hints into solid report; and the culmination of the previous day at her father's store; finishing with the urgency:

"Now, dear girl, tell me that there is not one word of truth in the whole thing!"

"How can I?" Jen cried, turning away. "And if I did—how could I be sure that even you would

believe me—that anyone else would trust me one instant?”

“I’ve said *I* would, Jen,” Miss Hartley replied loyally, but illogically. “The rest of the world can go hang itself!”

“Well, Sis, you have the right to know,” Jen answered, bravely. “I *have* been imprudent—by circumstances I could not control placed in false position. Listen, and then tell me frankly if you would have acted differently,” and Jen went on, detailing her whole adventure, from the visit of Lize Holden; but reserving all mention of any feeling but friendship between herself and Latham. Sis listened, with only brief ejaculations of surprise and admiration; but at the end of the recital she kissed Jen with a loud smack, her face glowing with enthusiasm as she cried: -

“Lor! Jen, what a heroine you are, though! Would n’t I give just lots to have done all that!”

“But think of the result, Sis! Even could I tell this story of bold, unwomanly adventure, how could I excuse it? And, even then, would people believe it! And, Oh! Sis, I don’t mind all the rest, but I dare not tell even papa!”

The glow faded from Sis Hartley’s pretty face; and she shook her head sadly:

“No; you daren’t tell him. Poppers are mighty good to us, Jen; but sometimes it’s so hard to make ’em understand! But cheer up, girl; maybe this talk will all die away before he ever hears any of it.”

“I fear he has had hints of it already,” Jen answered, ruefully. “Good and generous as he is, he

has never asked any explanation of my strange return; but sometimes I can just *feel* his eyes fixed on me so sadly—so reproachfully!”

“There’s one person can prove it, Jen!” Sis cried suddenly, clapping her hands. “Lize Holden! and I saw her coming back, myself, that very dawn.”

“She dare not! She has sworn against Mr. Latham,” Jen objected; “and besides, she knows that vile old creature, Holden, would murder her.”

“Guess you’re right,” Sis answered, musing. “And the Yankee captain was captured and sent—”

“Yankee captain! How could *he* know?” Jen broke in, wide-eyed.

“He found your ribbon, Jen; stopped by my gate, after you dodged them, and pretended he wanted a drink. But he stopped to show me that ribbon and to ask where you were.”

Jen was wholly mystified. How could the pursuing officer have known to whom the lost ribbon belonged? Who could have told him her name? Not Lize, surely; for that poor creature, as Sis told her, had fled from him. Suddenly the memory that John Holden led them, coupled with the talk that nearly cost his life, pointed to him; but how could that grim old man have guessed? No: it was mystery impenetrable; but she asked:

“What was the Yankee captain’s name?”

“Jen Freeman, you’ll lose all respect for me, I’m sure!” Sis Hartley responded, solemnly. “But, good looking as he was—a perfect gentleman, too, I was too surprised and too mad to find out his name! But”—this suddenly—“what stupids we both are.

There's no trouble about proof! How silly, I'm sure!" And the girl's musical laugh rang out clearly.

"Who *can* prove it?" Jen queried, eagerly.

"Latham! He's the fellow got you in the scrape. He's a poor goat if he can't get you out by one word. Then when General Forrest—"

"Hush! Not so loud!" Jen cried. "I would not have papa—no; nor *anyone*—know that I was that bold, unmaidenly thing, who rode in the charge with men! I made the general promise to keep my name a secret; and he shall, Sis!"

The other girl stared blankly, at this avowal of voluntary hiding from fame. She only faltered:

"Why in the world?"

"Why? Can you not see? If papa knew, he would have to know *how* I came there—*why* I left your house! Papa is proud of me, Sis; he must not become ashamed of me!"

"But, Jen, Mr. Latham himself can—"

"He is far away, too," Jen broke in nervously.

"Far away? What a stupid I am!" Miss Hartley replied. "Jen, in all my haste, I forgot to say that the officer who stopped the lynching was Mr. Latham himself!"

"Mr. Latham! *He* in Gadsden and not— Did *he* hear all this of me? Oh! Sis, I cannot bear this slander!" Her cheeks, brow and neck were all swept by the crimson flood of feeling, or of shame; but her eyes would not meet the searching gaze that queried them. But Sis Hartley rose and went to her gently,

taking both the unwilling hands in hers, as she soothed:

"It's all new to *you*, Jen. You've never had it before. But *I* have, dear—often! You won't mind, after awhile. Jen, you love that man!"

"I do *not*!" Jen cried, tearing away her hands and going to the window. "I tell you, Sis Hartley—I do not even *like* him!"

Sis stared. Then she sat on the bed again, sighing. "Then I don't know the signs, I guess," she said. "But I suppose I must be wrong."

"You certainly *are* wrong!" Jen turned and faced her calmly; her cheeks quite pale now. "I not only do not love him; but I do not feel that I would ask a courtesy—far less a favor—at his hands. I should lack self-respect if I did!"

And, in the depths of her own heart, the pure, untried girl felt that she spoke nothing but the truth; even though she did not speak all the truth. For, in her secret brooding over her troubles, she had lived over a hundred times the whole intercourse between the soldier and herself. She had over and again held before her strong common sense, the wide differences of family, of association and of taste that separated them. And these, having caused her first conquest of her own heart, in its early rebellion against her pride, seemed doubly cogent now. When the pebble had first dropped into his, causing it to overflow and its secret to spill on the ground, like water—she had stopped him honestly. She liked him well,—too well, perhaps she felt; but she did not love him, as a pure woman must love, for the first time,

before confessing it to herself. When he spoke once more at parting, there rose between them a great gulf of *convenance*, peopled with strange shapes and brilliant forms, all unknown to her; and the healthy common sense had once more stifled the infant Hercules of feeling. Then—while Latham was doing his best to win a name at the crossing, thinking only of her and of duty—Jen wrestled bravely with the baby giant in her heart, daily growing greater, yet only half-recognized. But when she walked through the midnight rain—when she hesitated not to cast aside reserve, habit, even delicacy, to save him from ignominious death, the girl failed to convince herself that she would have done as much for any other hero who wore the gray. When she rested in his arms that one instant—even before she was so tenderly raised to the horse he led, Jen Freeman knew that she loved this man. And, knowing it, she felt that she had not only sent him from her forever, but that she had been wise—that she had been true to herself and to him—in doing that. But Hercules—falsely called Cupid though he sometimes be—was stronger than this simple girl; and when they rode side by side into the jaws of death; when his coolness and strength bore her to safety—then, in that wooded covert, Jen Freeman could have fallen at his feet and worshiped him, as next to her God!

In her heart of hearts she felt this; nor did she blush to feel it. Pure love is ever brave enough to stand the light of conscience; ever brave enough to bear the brunt of sacrifice. And, at the very moment

of confession to herself, came new resolve to keep the faith she had plighted, equally to her own self-respect, as to what she knew must be the future happiness of both. Then, at their final parting, when he so pleaded for hope; when her own heart joined his in urgency, until she almost wavered in her truth to both,—then a chance word had steeled her resolution and recalled that she was, in very fact, “so different” from those he had known and had loved before.

But woman’s heart is ever a riddle, ten thousand times offered every day, yet still insoluble as that of the Sphinx. And Jen Freeman—strong, brave and proud as she believed herself, and not without good cause—yet felt shocked, aggrieved and frozen by his acceptance of her fiat. With his curt farewell—the failure to touch her hand—the cold “Good-day, Miss Freeman!”—came revulsion as sudden as severe! With no analysis of what she felt, Jen was shocked and hurt beyond comprehension. To herself she groaned that the man had played upon her, winning her love for sport, as did those in his “so different” world; and then and there she swore—sick, dizzy and cruelly wounded as she was!—that she would tear him from her heart, if it broke in the effort! And she rode home dazed; crept to her chamber full of other sorrow, she believed, and not realizing that this greatest one it was, which so numbed and paralyzed her efforts to be herself once more. Then came those long and heavy days of doubt and secrecy and insincerity; and last those creeping rumors—coming

as the wind comes, and felt rather than heard—which brimmed the bitter cup to very overflowing.

And so—alone, unaided and untaught—this child wrestled secretly with Hercules; realizing now the giant strength, yet praying and believing she might conquer still!

Bitter, cruel as it was, Jen Freeman hugged to her heart the belief that her love had been won only in sport; and in her hidden agony, she moaned that loss of self-respect—her bold adventure, now looked back upon with loathing—estrangement from her doting father—the detestable double-face she was forced to wear—that these, one and all, were Latham's work; and his work only for a petty triumph which she must despise—which she devoutly thanked her God she had never let him see, even at the end.

She had lost respect for this man she had so peddled above his fellows, she knew; and she convinced herself of that sad fallacy—so swiftly accepted, often to one's sorrow—that with respect all love must die!

All this Jen had lived over every day, almost every hour, of that dreadful week since Latham had spurred away with that curt farewell. And all this she lived over when her friend spoke; believing in her very soul that her reply was gospel truth. But its living took no tithe of the time to tell it; and Sis Hartley—with her best prop knocked ruthlessly away—could only stare and murmur:

“Well! I do declare!”

But the two girls talked long and fully over the ugly situation; Sis vowing loyally to stand by her

friend—to fight calumny to the death, though reft of sword and buckler both, and to keep her friend's secret, come what might. And, as she mounted her horse, and Jen kissed her clingingly, loth to part with her one comforter, Sis cried, with strangely mixed emotions:

“I do hate to leave you in your sorrow, Jen! But—gracious, girl! you *are* a heroine, though! God help and keep you, dear!”

* * * * *

It was to a rather distant settlement that Farmer Freeman rode that day, while the two girls discussed Jen's troubles. Homeward bound, he stopped at the house of an humble family whom he had long befriended. The widow had two daughters; one of them a notably giddy girl, even in that not precise and decorous region; and—to her mother's plaint about some recent escapade, more outrageous than usual—the farmer ventured on some mild reproach. In reply, the girl turned upon him insolently, with the words;

“Yer hed n't need ter cum so fur, farmer, hed yer? I 'low ez I hain't been seen a-ridin' roun' o' nights 'long o' soljers—nur on ther same critter, nuther! Ax yer own gell, ef she ben't no better'n I be!”

Shocked more than angered, at this new and hideous phase of rumors he had feared—rather than heard direct—Mr. Freeman sternly questioned the girl. So did her mother; but both in vain. She stolidly refused reply to question or to threat; covering her head with her skirt, rocking to and fro, and sobbing loudly; a favorite refuge with mountain

femininity, when closely pressed by inconvenient question.

So the saddened father rode home in deep and troubled thought. Never once did faintest doubt of his darling cross his mind; but these rumors must have some foundation, however trifling in fact. They must be stopped, if practicable, without apparent effort; but he felt that Jen would not speak of what was plainly weighing on her mind. And, to his delicate love and trust, it seemed that not to wait her voluntary confidence—delay it as she might—would imply suspicion foreign to all their past, wrongful now in her hidden sorrow.

Jen met him at the gate, tarrying to watch for him after Sis rode off; and she thought his face was sadder—while his kiss was even more tender—than at any moment since the “cloud had come down” between them.

“Papa, dear,” she said, stealing behind his chair, as he smoked alone that night, and pressing her lips on his forehead; “dear, gentle papa, you have heard something said about your little girl!”

The farmer removed his pipe from his lips; and something very like a sob followed it. But Jen came round in front of him, taking both his hands in hers, and looked full in his eyes.

“Answer, dear, dear papa. I am not afraid for you to speak.”

“Damn their talk!” the farmer blurted out. “I haven’t heard anything, my child! And I don’t believe one word of it, either!”

"I know that, papa," Jen answered, more like her old self. "But, dear, I want to say just one thing. Whatever you have heard—whatever you may hear, your daughter has never done one thing of which you need feel ashamed. No; don't answer me, dear papa. We understand each other now, and soon I may tell you—everything!"

From that night, father and daughter were always together, and much in the same old way. Ever watchful for the other's lightest wish, each avoided naturally any allusion to the recent past; and if—deep in his secret heart—the father suspected that the absent officer had some connection with the gentle sadness his child could not conceal, his absolute trust and intuitive delicacy forebore even mental query further. She had said she would speak—sometime. He could wait, and trust, meantime.

So the sweet old life might have come back wholly, had each not known—and, knowing, wondered if the other also knew—that secret enemies were still at work, to mar a perfect peace they could not comprehend.

And so the weeks wore away; months passed, and the unuttered compact between father and daughter was unbroken, as though engrossed on parchment and sealed with gravest signet. The tide of war had rolled far away from their home; only its distant boom and—now more rarely—its broken and shattered human wrecks—reached the hidden mountain nooks. But that warfare—

The viler as underhand, not openly, bearing the sword—

was still waged with the deadly missiles of hint and sneer, and wink, and nod of head, when the farm folks chanced to be the theme of better class neighbors. And, little by little, Jen grew paler and thinner in body, nervous in mind and morbid in spirit. She was fighting her good fight bravely, with what means she had; but, like her beloved Southland, she was fighting single handed, shut in from communication with her only sympathizer and possible ally, and hemmed by unseen foes whose numbers she could only guess by their seeming omnipresence.

And Farmer Freeman, noting the fading spirits and the paling cheek, raged in his secret soul and longed with a fierce longing for some tangible affront from man or woman. But only the nebulous, misty vapor of evil report seemed to float as thistle-down, toward them, making the petty martyrdom of gnat-stings far less bearable than had been the open trial of the stake. And then one day a letter came.

Army experts had been testing mineral deposits on outlying tracts of Farmer Freeman's land; and he was summoned to Richmond for immediate conference, and offered control of works the Ordnance Department would at once erect. The offer, to the farmer's patriotic sense, bore full force of a mandate; but the works were far away from home and Jen could not be left alone. Conference between the two confirmed his idea that he could not refuse; and Jen—ruefully but bravely, and with conflicting feelings she could not analyze—consented to accept, at last, her aunt's urgency and go to Wilmington. But as yet she would not consent to any proposition for breaking

the blockade, on one of her uncle's swift little "ocean grayhounds;" and she was sincere in the belief that her tear-dimmed eyes were taking but temporary farewell of life-long souvenirs of the only place she could ever call home, that last night she was to sleep beneath the loved and venerated roof.

To father and to daughter both, had come the thought that movement—however necessary now, however long delayed—might seem flight from the intangible enmity that had followed them so long. But the thought remained unspoken; each deeming it injustice to the other's faith and truth to believe that it could have come to the other. And, kneeling by the little bed, in that sweet little room, which had been her world, Jen Freeman poured out her full heart at the feet of the One Consoler; praying with the strength of her pure soul for guidance and for light; praying too for full forgiveness of him who was—as she believed—the cause of all her sorrows; whom she acknowledged only to the All-Knowing that she still loved!

CHAPTER XX.

RECONSTRUCTION DAYS.

THE night of actual and of open warfare was done, and the gray dawn of a misnamed peace had risen over the East. Fighting, in the field, between the brethren of the states was over forever; and "Reconstruction" had well begun its slow and wearying process of pulling down what little still stood in the conquered section.

No more did tales of siege and battle light the columns of the dulled newspapers; and already men famed for generalship began erasure of their glowing records, by fatal movements on that more dangerous field of statecraft.

The one shot—more fatal to the welfare of the entire country than had been all the volleys of Gettysburg and Appomattox—had sped from the pistol of the dramatic madman; and its echo had sounded on the northernmost boundaries of the republic, reviving the bitterest feelings of flagrant war on the very threshold of the miscalled Peace! The universal surge of a nation's grief had subsided to the restless groundswell of a sullen sorrow, that upbore the *débris* of a lately found quiet.

Abraham Lincoln was dead; and with him had been buried the last hope of just and speedy settlement of existent dangers, through his methods of vigorous honesty in statecraft. For people dwelling far remote from fields of actual conflict—with all its trials, hardships and compensations of excitement—had already been embittered by long doubt and misinformation. And these—absolutely ignorant of the nature of the Southern people, and of the temper of their leaders—were quick to accept wild theories of a far-reaching conspiracy, born in the distorted womb of sensation, and to connect with it names of the best and purest among the vanquished contestants.

Swift Vengeance—following fullest investigation, yet reaching her iron hand even about the throat of innocent womanhood, for judicial murder—had not allayed popular distrust; and, at the nation's capital, men still looked upon one another with furtive eyes, believing "Treason" ready to raise her "*Ça ira!*" at any moment, and whirl her mad *Carmagnole* up the avenue to the very gates of the White House! For small indeed, at that day, was the clear-headed minority which knew that treason was crushed forever; that no provocation and no misgovernment could again lead to arbitrament of arms; that the shackled South was sitting, like her of Scripture, in the ashes of her desolation, and that only

The voice of Rachel, for her children crying,
Will not be comforted!

Fewer still realized, as yet, that, out of those ashes, the South would soon rise above errors and malice

alike, to take her place in the more perfect union of the real reconstruction; that she would water her waste places, re-erect her own shattered resources, and lead her late family foes in a national advance that would astound the world! And, at that moment, none dreamed that livid bitterness of sectional hate could early die—North, as well as South; and that, out of its still green grave, would spring the fresh shoots of a common nationality, more vigorous—more indestructible than that of the scarce cold cadaver.

For, in these days close *post bellum*, personal poverty and the gloom of recent reminiscence hung as a pall over the conquered South; while restlessness and doubt had swiftly moved into the places of effort and of exultation, throughout the victorious North. The Union had been saved, indeed; but the problem that caused broad brows to knit in as yet unfruitful thought, was what to do with the prostrate South; how to set her once more upon her feet, and to send fresh blood through depleted arteries of commerce and stagnant veins of production—to the health of a new and living body politic.

And another problem—equally weighty, but as yet touching the North alone—was that far-reaching corruption, ever following expenditure of vast public treasure; an evil now already loathsome in every great center of population, but festering to far more prunnellent peril at the capital of the nation. And that capital, having just seen the tragic and aimless sacrifice of one chief executive, was in the throes of preparation for sacrifice of his pistol-promoted

successor, at the hands of the highest legislative tribunal of the land. So, strange indeed were the monsters cast up by the groundswell of that vast upheaval which had, for four dark and dreadful years, toppled down usage and tradition throughout the seemingly doomed country.

Nor was Washington City herself yet free from external marks of the struggle, during which she had been more than once the pivotal point of defense. Her people recalled their quivering suspense, after Bull Run; their tardy tidings from Jackson's "Italian campaign" in the valley; their dread before and during the days of Gettysburg; and the echo their own hearts gave to Early's guns at Silver Spring. For the fortifications thrown up to meet these dangers, still bristled on every strategic point; while uniforms, of every arm and rank, were the rule, rather than the exception, at every gathering in public or in private. And—though contract and lavish favoritism had already rubbed Aladdin's lamp, briskly and to purpose—the city of *post bellum* days did not sit, as now, high above her sisters in queenship of civic beauty. The work now so grandly finished had been begun, stimulating national pride and speculative pocket in almost equal degree. But "the American Haussmann," as yet, had merely hinted his perfected imitation of strategic Paris, which—now glorious and beautiful in days of perfect peace—might still advantage best in those of civil strife.

The national capital was ever full of strangers from every section, in days succedent to the peace; and those preachers who, on every sabbath morning,

offered up prayer for "All sorts and conditions of men," assuredly petitioned for these strangers within her gates. And their most varied sorts and ill conditions were from the South; some seeking pardon, to recover lost property; others political rehabilitation for usefulness at home; the majority hungry for those flesh-pots of Egypt, so attractive and so nosesome to their long-starved sense. And these last were easily recognizable, even among the visiting Southerners. For politics, at that day, of course had but one complexion; and he who hungered—however many inches thick he might essay to paint his face—needs must come to this at last, or taste not. Nor was there manifest reticence to take the prevailing tint; while there was recognizable greed about those who yearned for humble pie, however strongly flavored with the taint of their own stale principles.

Most readily recognizable—most obtrusive of self and paramount claim—were the hordes of blatant "Southern loyalists;" ever vaunting the sacrifices made and perils passed for devotion to the Old Flag, yet ever whining for payment in coin, for services claimed to have been given to principle. For it was a rule—proved past dispute since then—that those Southern Unionists who suffered aught from loyal adherence to their cause, made the least vaunt of their loyalty at close of the war.

On a bright, crisp morning of spring a notable figure strides down Pennsylvania avenue, the bulk of papers in his bony, brown hands showing his objective point to be some department of the West End. Tall, stalwart and stooping somewhat—but

more from habit than weight of evident years upon his silvered head—the man is ill at ease in his long frock coat of shiny black, and often raises his silk hat, as though it hurt him.

Suddenly he meets a well-dressed officer, with eagles upon his buff shoulder straps; and, with a gleam in his deep set eyes, and what tries to be a smile, advances with broad hand outstretched:

“Yer hain’t furgot ole fren’s, hez yer, Cap’n Wite?” he says, gravely. “I ’low e’m glad ter meet!”

The neat officer stares coolly past the speaker, as he says, quietly:

“Really, sir, you seem to have the advantage of me.”

“Yer ben’t jok’n’, be yer! I ’low, cap’n, er gin’ral, ez yer mebhe, we ’uns went a-raidin’ nigh ter Gadsding, in ’63; an’ John Holden hain’t growed no differ, hez he?”

“Really, Mr. Holden,” the officer replied, coldly, “I might recall such an occurrence, or such an individual; but, for the life of me, I can remember nothing in it especially to my credit, or—to *yours*! War, like poverty, makes strange bed fellows; but it is one of the best blessings of peace, that we may change our linen. Good-morning, sir!”

And, passing around the statue-like figure, not noting the still outstretched hand, Colonel White moved on; in time to receive a gracious smile and bow from the coupé of the minister from San Carlo.

Holden stood, dazed and with darkened face, his only gesture to raise the outstretched hand, grasping

his beaver fiercely and rear it—oriflamme-like—to the morning sun, as he muttered:

“Ther skunk whelp! ter use me 'gin m' own people an' then turn 'gin me! But ther Lord hez jestis', an' I 'low thar's good a-waitin' fur His instermunts, w'en tha's kick't by ther heels ov asses! These”—he gripped his papers vengefully—“be like ter mek a bigger man'n thet hark ter John Holden!”

Unmindful of wondering stare, or amused smile of passers at his strange pantomime, the Unionist strode rapidly away, toward the Department of Justice. He had put in early claim, not letting the wax cool upon the letter of peace, and had been rewarded with a small office, under the military government of Alabama; but, aiming higher, he was now seeking a collectorship of Internal Revenue, that Ultima Thule of Southern political aspiration. Nor had he found his path to it rose-strewn; for demand of the “scalawags,” as Southern Unionists were called, already clashed with those of that hungry horde of “carpet-bag” adventurers, swooping down upon the South for spoils, so soon as it was no longer dangerous to attempt that section “by assault.”

At the department, he seemed a familiar figure to the messengers, who exchanged meaning—if not respectful—glances on his advent. The chief was “busy with a senator,” so Holden waited long and patiently for an audience. His meeting with Colonel White had wakened many a bitter memory that slept while he tried to circumvent political foes; and with them awoke all the old hatred for the slayers of his boy, and vivid memory of his still unfulfilled oath.

He thought, too, how Farmer Freeman had prospered, spite of being an "unreconstructed rebel" still, and of secret information laid against him locally. For the unskilled government use of Freeman's mineral lands, during last years of the war, had merely hinted the vastness of their resources under skilled development; and keen-nosed speculators were already in treaty to capitalize and work their precious substrata.

"But I'low I kin tech him sore!" Holden muttered, half aloud. "I kin swar him outen parding sho'; an' tha's not a-dangerin' ther gold, a-vestin' 'thout no skewr'ty. I'll drap er hint ter ther jedge an' he'll—"

A clerk broke into his musing to say that the chief would see him now; and the Alabama loyalist strode grimly into the presence of perhaps the most noted—while probably the least popular—of the ultra leaders of the day.

The judge's personality was anything but a winning one, spite of pronounced marks of power, culture and high breeding in his face, gesture and address. There was habitual gloom adding to his natural reticence; and, even then, his face had the trick of losing consciousness, for the moment, of matters nearer—seeming to reflect ugly pictures of the past. If there had ever been any magnetism about him, it had now shifted from the positive to the negative pole of the human battery; repelling, not attracting. He took Holden's outstretched hand as coldly as barest courtesy permitted, letting its broad bulk slip through his unclosed fingers, with the touch per-

functory, but none of "the personal touch." Doubtless, this noted official was disgusted—if not with "greatness thrust upon him" by his lurid public career, at least with its uncongenial following. This could but contrast strangely—in bitter revenge of time's whirligig—with the cherished pursuits of a long lifetime; more strangely still with those home surroundings, impressed by stately quiet and nameless charm—once known, never to be forgotten—of one of the grand women of her day. For never had the social opulence of the Blue Grass state lent to the "Republican Court" of later days three representatives more gifted, more gracious, or more lavishly dowered by nature than those sisters—of whom one was his true and loyal helpmate, in darkest shadow as in broadest sunshine.

So now, the official's face wore its introspective mask; and he stood absently, as Holden sat down, placed his hat upon the floor and ostentatiously thrust his papers into it, saying:

"I 'low ye're look'n' well, jedge, an' now—"

"Your papers have been carefully examined, Mr.—Holden," the judge said, absently, glancing at the scrawled card on his desk. "But nothing in them belongs to this department. Your appointment rests solely with Mr. Secretary of the Treasury."

"An' ther lab'rer ben't wuth his hire, ben't he?" was the grim retort. "W'en er man hez resked life an' lim' fur ther Un'in fur fo' long year, he hain't got no claim, hez he?"

"Your claims will doubtless be carefully considered,

along with others filed for the same position," the official said, vaguely.

"But, ef I kin pint out er new cornspir'cy," Holden answered, keenly watching effect of his words; "ef I cud name ther hed an' boss ov them Ku-Klux ter hum, wot 'ud thet help?"

A gleam crept into the dull eyes of the chief, ordinarily looking inward, as at some bitter memory. And Holden noted it, though the answer was wary:

"Any proofs you could give, Mr. Holden; any names—accompanied by provable facts—would doubtless be considered valuable service."

"S'pos'n' I ge'en ther name ov Phil Freeman, ez ther *hed* ov 'em roun' my neighbor'd? Yer set thet down ter wunst, an' yere be er list ov lan's an' sech ez he owns. You 'uns hed orter cornfiskate 'em all; fur he war sho' a pizen bad rebul afore he riz ther Ku-Klux, yau!"

The great man took the eagerly extended papers; casting his eye carelessly on them, as though already weary of his visitor. But something seemed to interest him suddenly; for he began to read rapidly, turning page after page with professional speed.

Holden's stealthy gaze followed him, as a cat's the mouse well within reach; and triumph began to glow red in his eyes, as he felt he had played a trump card, and a big one, too. But the judge quietly refolded the documents; and—as the other stretched his great hand for them—placed a heavy paper weight upon them. And his face was as hard and inscrutable as that of the Sphinx, as he said:

"I regret to hasten you, Mr. Holden; but I have an engagement at this hour. No;—you can leave these papers. They are filed now, and cannot be withdrawn; but will be used as best fits your case. Good-morning, Mr. Holden."

The official bowed coldly as his visitor walked out; but, quickly seating himself, he reopened the papers, scanning them with close and eager scrutiny. Then he struck his desk-gong sharply; saying to the clerk who answered—but without looking up:

"In my *private* file, McFadden, in the M's; letters of Middletown & Screws, New York, with maps of North Alabama and plats of lands! Strange," he added to himself, as the clerk withdrew, "but, perhaps it was only a coincidence. In any case, the old traitor is doubtless lying!"

CHAPTER XXI.

CHARGES AND CONFESSIONS.

JOHN HOLDEN passed swiftly through the ante-room to the corridor, his silk hat pushed far back from his corrugated forehead; and his lips working as though repeating the judge's word. But, at the stair head, he halted abruptly and moved up the corridor, turning his back on the man ascending. But the other—grave, earnest and absorbed—took no note of him; passing on to the anteroom and closing its door behind him.

"I hain't a-doubtin', be I?" Holden muttered, staring at the closed door. "Et ar' him, sho' ez ther Lord sets thar! An' he do seem a-prosperin', ef he war ther wus' rebul ov ther lot! Wot kin ther sesesh want 'long ov ther jedge? I 'low I kin fin' out, fur ther cuss is on him, ef I hez plum furgot my yoath! Mebbe ther time hez cum w'en I kin strike mo' sho' fur waitin'. I hez jes' streck wun; I 'low I kin wait fur 'tuther, an' watch for ven'gince!"

He drew back into a closed doorway; his green eyes gleaming on the one Beverly Latham had just entered. That whilom giddy trooper had changed little outwardly, since he saved from the noose the watcher on him now. But graver and filled with

plans for aiding his own people, higher aspirations had placed their stamp upon his still handsome face. Appomattox found him colonel of a regiment under Hampton; Forrest's promotion on the field leading, step by step, to the head of the corps in which he got his troop. On parole at his loved home—happily showing little of war's devastating drain, in the more direct paths of battle—Latham at once went to work for family first, and neighbors next. His ever idolizing mother and sisters now worshiped him as a veritable hero; never wearying of question as to minutest detail of his army life. And he answered honestly—while modestly, ever—in all matters save one; for those proud women only learned that Forrest had promoted, "for service;" and no mention of Jen Freeman—far less allusion to their past—ever left his lips, even to Stella.

And where she was, he himself could only surmise; ignorant if she were married or single. Active duty had prevented close quest; and two letters to Shelby—ostensibly on business of their service together—brought no mention of her name, in his brief replies. So Latham must fain believe that Jen Freeman meant her words; that she had forgotten him, and he should never see her again.

Absorbed in the work of rehabilitating his state, the man found little time for sentimental regrets; yet, often, in long, solitary rides, he would live over the scenes of that summer; would take from his breast the camp-worn locket and gaze long and wistfully at the faded blue ribbon, which he refused to let sisterly fingers replace by a fresher one.

Business, for himself, or others, often carried Latham to Washington; and he was already known to many bureau chiefs—and to men in that congress to which the whole South now looked so anxiously—as a man of decided strength of courage for his rights, and of large influence at home besides. So, it was no strange name that McFadden announced to the judge, when he tendered the papers of Middletown & Screws, from his private file.

“I am busy for five minutes,” he said, hastily opening the papers handed him. “Then, admit him.”

When the Virginian entered, the judge coldly, but courteously, motioned him to a seat; but Latham stood quietly, saying:

“I have but a moment to stay, sir. I merely called again to ask if those papers, filed in Mr. Preston’s case, have been passed upon.”

“They have been examined,” was the cold reply, “but I have not made any endorsement upon them.”

“May I ask why?” Latham replied. “Are not all the statements they contain verified by proof?”

“I believe that is the case,” the judge admitted.

“Then, sir, there is no justice in delaying action. The old gentleman needs these papers; without them, he is at the mercy of enemies and sharpers.”

“It does not appear that he has taken the oath.”

“There was no necessity,” Latham answered, quickly. “He was over age, a non-combatant and never a politician. There was nothing for him to swear.”

“He was a warm rebel sympathizer, though.”

"He is a native Virginian, sir," Latham replied. "He was a good citizen of his state, as he now is of the Union!"

The official looked gravely at the speaker; then he retorted sharply:

"Yet, you took the oath, Mr. Latham!"

"I did sir. When I surrendered my sword, the war had ended—on our side. You have been an officer, sir, and must know that a soldier's parole is his bond. After that, the oath of allegiance was a mere form, because I meant to keep my faith with the victors. And, by taking it, I could be of more practical use to my people than by sulking at home over vain regrets. But, sir, for Mr. Preston's case, even a rebel sympathizer is said to have some legal rights. Those papers should be endorsed by you to the Treasury Department."

"You seem emphatic, Mr. Latham," the judge answered coldly. "But should they not be endorsed—"

"I should appeal in person to President Johnson, in that case," Latham replied, quickly. "The matter is too plain for even quibble to—"

He stopped suddenly. His eye, chancing to fall upon the card lying near, mechanically read the name of John Holden. And the official's cold eye following his, suddenly lit with an idea, and his lips changed the words, already formed upon them, to the bland reply:

"You are right, Mr. Latham; and this department never deals in quibbles. It is perhaps rather grace,

than strict justice, to forego the oath; but I will refer the Preston case favorably."

"I am glad of your decision, sir," Latham said, intentionally avoiding thanks for what he claimed as a right; and he turned to go.

"One moment, if you please," the other said. "I believe you served in Alabama; in that mountain region where loyalty was least dangerous."

"Yes, sir; I served once in North Alabama."

"You knew a family of Freemans?"

The question was shot at him suddenly; and to his disgust, Latham felt his face flush hot, as he answered:

"If you mean Philip Freeman, a farmer, I knew him. I was once ill at his house."

"A blatant politician? A popular leader, is he?"

In spite of his surprise, Latham smiled at the idea the question raised, as he answered:

"Least so of any man I can recall. But what of him? I hope he is in no trouble."

His eyes, following swift flash of thought, fell on John Holden's card again; and the judge's eyes followed his, as he answered, guardedly:

"No; not exactly trouble; but it is well for any man, in these times, to be vouched for"—he rose gravely, bowing gracefully—"by one we respect and rely upon, though we differ with him on many points. I presume, Mr. Latham, that *should* need come, this man can prove quiet, loyal life?"

"If any man in the South can convince your department of that, sir, I should say Farmer Freeman could. But, good-day, sir," said Latham, recollect-

ing himself. "I shall call at the Treasury Department, in the morning?"

"The papers will be there, Mr. Latham," the official replied; and the Virginian left the room, passing into the corridor. Just at the stair-head, he met John Holden, face to face.

"I 'low yer hezn't furgot me," he said.

"No, I have not forgotten you," was the cool answer. "Unpleasant memories hang by us. Good-morning."

"But Holden—lowering as his look grew under the taunt—hung close to his side, as he passed down the steps, coming straight to his point.

"Yer mind ther las' time we met, yung soljer?"

"Unfortunately, it was not the 'last time'. I was silly enough to prevent their hanging you," Latham replied.

"Tha' hedn't no cause, hed tha'?" Holden condescended the affront, intent on his object, and, fixing his eyes keenly on the other's face, added: "I hedn't sed nuthin' 'cep'n wot ther whole mounting hez sed sence. I 'low Freeman's gell did hev her larks ov nights, 'long ov her yung men!"

Latham stopped on the stair, his cheeks burning and his eyes ablaze, as he turned on the speaker. But he controlled his voice to calm contempt, as he answered slowly:

"I thought then I was wrong to save your neck! Traitor to your section and your neighbors as you are, I presume you have come here to grovel for blood money; but I cannot see how you can hope to help your case, by lying about women."

John Holden's face darkened still more, and his eyes gleamed redder, as his foe spoke; his hand clutching tremblingly, as for a weapon. But strong will controlled him; and the gleam of hate in his eyes changed to a leer of cunning, as he answered:

"Yer hezn't loss yer spunk, hez yer? But thet don' mek no differ. Ther gell hez gone, an' ther bad name she leff' hezn't. She'd orte a-know'd she war a-dangerin', meetin' ov Johnny an' ov Yank, late o' nights. But I 'low ez yer hain't a-keerin' ter lissen, an' ther's no need nuther—"

Had the Unionist been his satanic majesty himself, horns, hoofs and tail, Beverly Latham could not have restrained the exclamation:

"Gone! Is she—dead?"

"Live and peart, I 'low!" the Unionist chuckled, with an ill-suppressed gleam of triumph in his eyes. "Her paw hez druv her off, 'long ov nun ov ther gells choosin' ter notis her. Tha's a reckulus lot, but tha' ken't stan' too much!"

Through the rush of conflicting emotions, the man heard these words plainly; but he himself could never have told what they brought to him. Memory, surprise, sorrow and self-contempt warred for mastery of his brain. Physical impulse urged him to lay at his feet the traducer of the woman he had loved; but something more potent still impelled an outward calm, as he turned full on Holden, saying:

"I have known you only as a traitor and spy, at home. You cannot expect I will be seen in the street with a known scalawag! Don't follow me!"

He strode into the street, followed by Holden's eyes, gleaming with triumphant malice, as he stood within the doorway muttering:

"He hez spunk, sho'! But I hez streck him sore, fur he do b'l'eve it! Curses on 'em all! But ther Lord's work ar' doin', fur ther trap ez laid fur ther dad, an' ther hunter hez turn'd 'gin his gell! His tim' hez cum at las'!"

The garish daylight galled Latham's dizzy sense; the crowded streets seemed to clog and dam the current of his swift-rushing thought. Mechanically he turned into the White House grounds; striding rapidly toward the lonesome monument south of them. Unable to reason, under the sudden blow, intuition vainly strove to repel the statements which memory would raise up, in some sort, to confirm. Yet memory, at the same time, would raise pictures of those peaceful, happy summer days; of the pure life and gentle womanhood of her, who had nursed him back to health—had taught him to love her by sheer force of gentleness and truth! Why should he weigh the word of that vile traitor, instead of taking train for Alabama, to disprove—

But the girl had gone! That could not be a lie. And where had she fled—and why? For memory emphasized her strong aversion to leaving her father, even at his and her aunt's urgency! So there must be cogent reason, when she did so; and then, clear and sharp before him, rose that midnight, when that creeping white form—hesitant, fearful, and in guise *he* should not see—had slipped from the house, moving guiltily toward the gate. And there—in the

noonday of the busy city—he could hear the tremor in her voice, urging him “not to tell papa!” Then, clear as in judgment, came to his ear the quavering voice of the old cripple, meeting him in the roadway as he galloped off with her blue ribbon, and driveling of rebel lover from Gadsden, and of another in the Federal ranks! Doubtless the old wretch lied. But, if others knew of these reports—spoke of them openly; if, knowing this, Jen had left home rather than meet and disprove them—what then?

Once more, in thought, he rode behind her into the charge; felt the agony of terror and suspense—the thrill of joy that paid for all as he swept her from saddle, bearing her to safety in his arms! How could a woman with one impure taint have acted thus? But, even then—parting with him, perhaps for ever—she had shrunk away because she was “so different” from his people,—from Stella! So his brain whirled with its sudden transition from doubt to trust—from love to suspicion; and, still striding on, seeing no one—forgetful of the business and social demands of the present under pressure of the past—Beverly Latham was near the government gardens when he heard:

“Why, Colonel Latham! Glad to see you! When did you get here?” And Colonel White extended a cordial hand.

“In 1863—a—only this morning,” Latham answered, pulling himself together bravely; but taking the other’s hand rather absently. “Business for some of my people; and Stella wrote she needed me, as her visit is nearing its end.”

"I regretted much, when she told me so," White answered, gravely. "I have had the privilege of seeing so much of Miss Latham, colonel, that I will miss her, in common with all Washington—at least, all of it that she will permit to know her."

"Naturally all Virginia ladies must make election, just now," Latham replied. "Faces and families in Washington are new to us now; and it is the exception when we meet courtesy and greeting, like yours, for instance. But, of course, we cannot expect—nor seek them."

"I understand that," White said, quietly. "You Virginians have so much pride."

"Only in assertion of our rights," was the reply. "But in social matters we do not come *in forma pauperis*."

"Which way were you walking so fast?" White asked, shifting to the safer ground.

"To—a—the Treasury Department," Latham answered, looking at his watch; "but it is rather late, so I'll go to my cousin's—Mrs. Dandridge's."

"If you don't mind five minutes, I'll walk with you," White answered, quickly. "I was only going to order a basket for Miss Latham. I have a greenhouse permit, and I know she is fond of flowers."

Latham nodded assent, looking keenly into the frank, handsome face of his late foe. Stella, his favorite sister, had paid several visits to her cousin and schoolmate, Betty Dandridge; and she had written, and spoken, very kindly of Colonel White. Both had met him, on Latham's first visit after the surrender; and his courteous, but frank, views of

"the situation" had caused them to "take to" him more than to any other habitu  of Mrs. Dandridge's somewhat piebald receptions. A small wondering query crept into Latham's mind, as they walked toward that lady's; but at her door, he asked cordially:

"Shall we have the pleasure of seeing you to-night?"

"I hope so, if I am not too late. I have an engagement in— By the way, she is one 'of you'; a fair Confederate with a wealth of accomplishments and mineral lands; and a horsewoman to shame Di Vernon's self!"

"A Virginian?" Latham asked, absently. His mind went straight back to that ride, so freighted with bitter memories now, when another woman had ridden like Di Vernon.

"No; from the far South," the colonel answered. "What your people call 'of the Paris Confederacy.' She has just returned from a European visit of years; full of music and languages, and is visiting Mrs. Craig, in that small rebeldom, Georgetown. I have an idea that I may unearth a small romance—Hello! there's my car. Hope to see you to-night; *au revoir!*" and the officer ran to board his car.

Latham found the ladies out calling; and, lounging into Mrs. Dandridge's handsome library, he picked up the afternoon paper and—began to think again. More coolly, his mind went over the same ground it had covered in feverish haste that morning; but, strive as he would, he could decide nothing, and wearied matter finally triumphed over wearied

mind. When he awoke—sitting bolt upright, at once, from camp habit—a tall, beautiful woman stood beside him; the gleaming arms and low corsage of dinner dress telling the hour, and a saucy pout still on the full lips that had waked him with a kiss.

“You runaway!” those lips said. “Betty and I waited a full hour. Now you’re sleeping as though you had lunched at Harvey’s!”

“But I’ve had no lunch, Stella dear,” he answered. “I was detained by business—”

“Of course! You’re as ready as a married man! Next time I get a new brother, he shall be no business man. But, you poor, dear boy,” she went on, sitting by him and passing her grand arm about him, “you do look tired. Go up and bathe your red eyes, before Betty comes down to dinner.”

“Any company?” he asked, wearily. “No? Then I’ll talk to you instead of beautifying. Stella, Colonel White may drop in this evening.”

“I hope so,” Miss Latham answered. “Then I can thank him for that basket of rare flowers I found waiting my return. Bud—” her eyes came quickly back to him, from the bouquet—“I’m so glad we are going back home!”

“Why, Stella! I thought you wrote you were having ‘a lovely time?’”

“I was, Bev.; but I’m tired now of being received by the truly good and loyal, only on sufferance.”

“Sufferance—not suffrage—is the badge of all our tribe,” he paraphrased in his old fashion.

"I don't vote," she answered, saucily. "Why! what *do* you think a fearful creature, with red hair and a squint, asked me this morning?"

"Almost anything, from such a source," he laughed.

"She asked if all Southern women did not feel like wearing sackcloth and ashes, for urging our men to fight against 'the flag!'"

"Well; you should," he answered, lightly.

"I told her we did not object to ashes—of roses," the woman returned saucily, "and that I'd rather wear sackcloth—tailor made—than some of the monstrous toilettes I saw in Washington. I saw her glance at the mirror, for she wore a perfect terror! But, poor things! How should the wives and daughters of men, suddenly rich on government swindling, know how to dress?"

"But, sister mine, do all your Washington friends receive you on sufferance? Buds from the government greenhouse do not say so!"

"Colonel White is—a gentleman," Stella said, briefly, but her eyes left her brother's and rested on the handsome basket.

"And a scholar," the man finished for her. "No, don't pout, Stella! I like and respect him, if he is a—Union officer who fought against us!"

"He was right! Colonel White is a New Yorker, born and reared; a graduate of West Point," the Virginia girl retorted warmly. "And, had he not fought for his flag, he would be a—scalawag!"

"Certainly; and no man respects honest opposition more than I," her brother answered, frankly.

"Colonel White, and thousands like him, could have done nothing else and won our respect."

"I knew that, you grand old boy!" she cried. "That was the reason you stopped their lynching that old scalawag in Alabama; like—"

"The ass that I was!" he finished, rising from the sofa and striding away. Her chance word recalled the morning's meeting too sharply; but he controlled himself, sitting quietly by her again.

"Sister, you are a woman, and a clever one," he said gravely. "I am your junior, and not a society man now; but I have learned too well that sudden intimacies bring woful results, sometimes."

Stella Latham slipped her slim, patrician hand trustfully into his, as she answered:

"Do not be alarmed, bud. The Lathams are not given to social indiscretion; and I will not need a caution, until there is more ground for it than anything that—that Colonel White has yet said to me. But," she added more lightly, as she turned her flushed face full to him, "you are such an ingrained, old business bachelor now, you will never let me have a chance at you, as I used to. Just wait until you—meet your fate!"

"Perhaps I have met her, Stella!"

The tone, rather than the words, made the girl turn and stare at her darling, as she exclaimed: "Bev, I really believe you are in earnest! And you never told mamma, or me? Are you serious?"

"If I ever was in my life, dear! Hush! here comes Betty. After coffee, I'll tell you all about it, Stella. Now, I must talk chaff to her!"



IT WAS A NOTEWORTHY COUPLE.—Page 281.

He smoothed the frown from his forehead; and the voice was quiet and easy that bartered commonplace and badinage with the others. But the elaborate dinner seemed unusually long to Stella Latham; her deep love for her brother stimulated by woman's curiosity. So she dragged him from Mr. Dandridge's "Cabanas," back to the library, to hear his romance. Frankly, in detail, and not without sense of relief, Latham poured his full heart into her sympathetic one. Yet—loyal and true, alike to himself and to memory—he uttered no word of the doubt that had arisen; lauded the good, pure and high traits he had loved in Jen Freeman, and only said that she had twice refused him.

"And you love her still, my brother?" Stella's lips trembled, as she pressed them on his forehead.

"I believe—I fear I will love her always! And yet, I never wish to look upon her face again!"

As he spoke, the brilliant drawing room changed to a mountain cove, under the full moon; and, through its tree-sifted beams, he saw a white figure gliding stealthily—to what?

"But you never spoke her name, Bev.," Stella said, softly. "No, bud! Don't! I was silly!"

"It is a simple name, sister; Jen Freeman."

"Freeman?" she echoed. "What a strange coincidence!"

"What do you mean?" He stared now.

"Nothing; but that is the name of the girl Colonel White—raves about; his 'romance,' as he calls her, though he never will explain!"

"It is not an unusual name," Latham answered, gravely. "But the lady he spoke of to me must be a very different woman from the pure mountain maid I learned to love."

"I hope so," Stella answered absently; her eyes fixed upon White's basket. "*She* must have been a dangerous woman for any true man to meet!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"A KNOT OF RIBBON BLUE."

IT was a luxurious office of the War Department that Beverly Latham entered, to be warmly greeted by Colonel White, on the morning after his confession.

"Delighted to see you, colonel," the officer said, cordially grasping his hand. "You know Captain Darrell, I believe? Sit down and have a cigar. Was very sorry not to call last night; but I could not get off from Georgetown early enough. Mrs. Craig had an impromptu musicale. You know Mrs. Craig, of course?"

"No, it was before my day that Mr. Craig was a Southern leader in the senate," Latham explained. "But the fame of his brilliant wife penetrated even to the V. M. I.; and she was a friend of my mother's. But I did not know that she was living here."

"No, but she has been here all winter, using her vast acquaintance and resistless social power for what you would call 'the good cause.'"

"It is a good cause," the Southerner answered, gravely, "to uphold right against might. But, pardon my broaching politics to you."

"You need not," Captain Darrell broke in. "I don't think that either White or I need conversion. We are so much in line with the president's present views that, if not 'disloyal,' we are about as near 'copperheads' as men may be, who wear these!" and he laughed, as he touched his shoulder straps.

"Darrell was with the general on the Potomac," White said, frankly; "and I was with Sherman at the wind-up. Like all men at the front, we believe that matters would have rested on the basis of the surrender, had Mr. Lincoln been spared to us."

"To the country, you might say," Latham replied. "We of the South—even more than you can—realize a national calamity in the madman's act. But I rejoice that Mrs. Craig is using her great influence for good."

"She is," White answered. "She is a splendid woman in every way. She has quite captured me!"

"Love me, love my aunt!" Darrell laughed; but his senior quickly, and rather uneasily, cried:

"What nonsense you talk, Fred! I have only seen Mrs. Craig's niece three times!"

"Self defense is half accusation!" the junior retorted. "Is it not, Colonel Latham? But he is excusable. I only wish 'Phil Sheridan' were my horse, and I were to ride with her this evening. I'm half jealous of my chief, as it is."

"But, Darrell," White protested, "Colonel Latham does not know Miss Freeman."

At the name, Latham felt the blood surge to his face; and he looked far, through the windows, across the Potomac, as he answered:

"No, but her name recalled that of friends, when I served in Alabama."

"Alabama! Why I thought you served in Virginia!" White cried, suddenly; and his hand mechanically went toward a half opened drawer.

"I did, mostly; but one summer I hunted deserters about Sand Mountain, while I served under General Forrest."

A strange expression passed across White's face, now turned steadily to the speaker. Then he said slowly, and as though by accident:

"I was with Colonel Streight, when Forrest gobbled us. Were you opposite us when we crossed the Tennessee?"

"If you will swear not to hang me, I'll confess," the Southerner answered, laughing. "I held that crossing by dummy fires, and by running the legs nearly off my nine men,—playing army in front!"

White sprang up, extending his hand: "Shake! No other man ever so deceived Streight; ever made such an ass of an advance commander! No! I know, I guess; I led it!"

The late foes shook hands warmly, laughing over the incident; but Latham grew grave again. Once more his gaze wandered out over the Potomac; as memory recalled another night, when *she* had come through dark and rain, and those wild days succeeding. Once more his heart grew chill with dread, then bounded with joy and pride unspeakable, as he strained her to it, and Forrest's voice, high over hoof and cannon, called: "Well done, sir!"

But he came back to the present suddenly; for White was staring at him keenly, as he said:

"Mrs. Senator Craig is an Alabamian. Perhaps those Freemans you knew were also relatives of hers?"

"Impossible; they were plain country people," Latham answered. The idea that had sprung into his mind when Stella called the name had been dismissed from it. But he wondered at the strange expression in White's eyes, as he added: "I am all the prouder to call you my friend now, White; for, as Colonel Damas says: 'We never know how much we like a man, until we have fought him!'"

"This makes romance of the war number two, White," laughed Darrell; and, spite of the other's warning glance, he went on: "The other, 'tenderer far to tell,' was in that same raid, where you played him off so!"

"*You* had a romance there?" Latham cried, suddenly.

"Scarcely that; only an odd adventure," White replied uneasily, "not worthy of that name."

"Wasn't it? What would you call it, Colonel Latham," the inveterate chaffer ran on glibly, "if a fellow carried through the war a scrap of ribbon, once blue, but now tri-color from camp dirt?"

Latham colored to the very roots of his hair; but feeling White's inquisitorial glance, though he could comprehend no reason for it—he answered, gravely:

"Not a romance, necessarily, captain. *I* did that; but"—he drew the dented locket from his breast—"it was on the portraits of mother and sister."

"May I see them?" White asked, eagerly extending his hand; and now his face was the one that flushed as Stella's pictured eyes met his. Yet, his left them, gazing on that frayed and faded knot of blue; and again his hand wandered to the half opened drawer, just as the clock chimed the quarter to noon.

Discipline bowled out sentiment. The soldier sprang up, handing back the locket with a parting glance at Stella's face, as he said:

"I must leave you with Darrell now. Pardon want of ceremony, but the general wants me at noon."

"No, I will walk with you," Latham answered. "I have an engagement at that hour, and with even a bigger man than General Grant!"

"Treason again!" Darrell laughed. "And in the very Department of War! By Jove! you Virginians do beat the world!" he added glancing at the square, plain-enveloped card Latham had extended: "Listen! 'The president will receive Mr. Latham of Virginia, at twelve o'clock this day'!"

"You forget, Virginia is the mother of presidents," White answered.

"Rather, the grandmother, now," Latham retorted. "And not of all presidents. She has not yet adopted Andy Johnson. But he can be of infinite good to my suffering compatriots; and I am grateful for this opportunity he gives me to speak for them, to him!"

White had buttoned his coat and taken his hat, ready to move; but suddenly, missing some paper, he opened the drawer and hastily pulled out several.

As he did so—unnoted by him—a faded strip of blue ribbon fell fluttering to the floor. But Latham's eyes were riveted upon it; his face flushed hotly, then grew deadly pale. As in a flash of lightning, the midnight figure at the farm stood before him. Like a knell the words of the old cripple sounded in his ears! For this trifle "light as air" was to his morbid brooding "confirmation strong" of his most horrible suspicion. There was no doubt now of Jen's falsity to herself, if not to him; for he could have sworn to that ribbon, its jagged end severed by his own knife!

This was White's romance! The knot of ribbon had been gage of love from—her. White was the Yankee rival, of whom the doting cripple had warned him! But White, busy on his search, noted neither Latham's tell-tale face, nor the loss of his trophy. But Darrell, stooping for it, cried gaily:

"You'll lose your romance ribbon, recreant knight!"

White turned quickly, took the ribbon and thrust it hastily in his breast; then said to Latham:

"I am at your service now."

Neither spoke until they reached the dividing gate of the White House grounds, about to separate. Then, after brief "good-morning," White stared after the other, saying to himself:

"By Jove! but the world is very small. *He* certainly is the man; but can *she* be Miss Hartley's friend? Pshaw! 't is only odd coincidence; but I will find out this afternoon."

It was a noteworthy couple that galloped across the Georgetown bridge, a while before sunset; both sitting their fine horses like masters of that exercise which witches worlds. The lady's tailor-made habit plainly spoke its Paris fashioning; adding to the perfection of her perfectly developed figure, lissome and natural as that of a wood nymph. The coiled masses of her hair flushed warm to the kiss of the declining sun; and the slim, gauntletted hands controlled "Phil Sheridan's" fretful head with graceful ease. And, not without pride, Colonel White noted the glances of admiration that followed the pair, as they passed around the White House grounds and struck for the Arlington bridge.

But only the pleasant chatter of society—picked out by the woman's keen dissection of composite architecture, or quick criticism of not wholly artistic statuary—occupied them, as they crossed the broad Potomac, now cool after the kiss of the sun, that only paused to gild the heights of Arlington. From them, as the horses rested, both looked back over wide-reaching panorama of street and dome and spire, fronted by wide-parked public grounds, and already showing long vistas of blinking lights. Then the man said, suddenly:

"Travel broadens one greatly, Miss Freeman."

"An accepted truism, colonel," she answered with her frank smile. "But what called it up just then?"

"Your clever comment, as we rode up here," he said, simply, "coupled with some wonder as to what you would have said of all this in—well—say, in August, 1863."

"I should have been struck dumb with wonder then," she answered. "I was a simple country girl."

"How long were you abroad?" he asked, quickly.

"Since that very year; in the autumn."

"And you ran the blockade, because you were tired of the war? Because you feared its privations?"

She looked very grave, but still answered calmly:

"No, I went because papa insisted, and an aunt in Wilmington urged its advantages."

"And, for them, you turned your back upon all the romance of the war? Pardon me, but I presume every Southern girl saw—or dreamed of—some pretty romance in it!"

"Why should you?" she asked, gravely. "We felt sympathy, suspense, pity; but these are not the basis of romance. It was all so different, on our side, from what you knew, on this."

"Perhaps," he answered, "but much of these abided with us, also, especially in such times as Forrest was chasing Colonel Streight and me out of your neighborhood."

"*You* were down there?" Jen exclaimed. Then suddenly a burning blush overspread cheeks, brow and neck; and she gazed across the river steadily, as she asked:

"Did you stay long? Did you know anyone?"

"Not longer than it took my horse to carry me out of Forrest's reach, before he gobbled us," White answered frankly. "And the only person I remember is your pretty friend—Miss Hartley!"

Jen Freeman turned full to her companion, not

blushing now, but very pale, though the evening glow was warm upon her hair.

"Colonel White," she said with quiet dignity, "we are almost strangers; but, even so, it is best that we should not deal in riddles. You are doubtless the Union officer who spoke my name to Miss Hartley, so much to her surprise." She paused an instant; but as he did not interrupt, she went on bravely: "Your courtesy to her then, and to me later, no less than your position here, assure me that you have made no improper use of—of any surmise of your own about any chance trophy you may have captured from—a woman!"

"I thank you sincerely for your confidence in my honor, Miss Freeman," the Northern soldier answered, lifting his hat. "I should blush for our uniform if I thought it covered any man, who could misuse an accident like that. You cannot object to riddles more than I; but I must correct your belief that we are strangers. Since 1863, I have carried in my heart a true and sincere admiration for a woman, brave and generous enough to risk her life for that of her defender! For all those years I have safely kept what you call my 'chance trophy;' and,—whatever story it may have—I have breathed no word of to man or woman."

"I believe you, sir!" the girl said, earnestly.

"Then, if you be Miss Hartley's friend, this has been kept only in trust for you."

He drew the ribbon from his breast, handing it to her, his head still uncovered.

"You are a brave, true man, Colonel White!" Jen cried in her old, impulsive way. "Anything that this scrap of silk recalls matters not. Suffice it that I thank you sincerely and regard your conduct that of a true friend!"

She thrust the ribbon into her bosom; then held out her hand frankly; and the man took it in his with all the deference due to her sex, but with the warm grasp of a comrade.

"You understand that I have had no opportunity to mention this before," he said, quietly, "and I had to be certain before I dared to speak. I should now add that I shall not refer to this again; and that—finding this upon a bush that night, I spoke to Miss Hartley, more in jest than earnest, when I chanced to hear that you were her guest."

For one instant Jen Freeman's brown eyes—better trained now, than when she had lost that ribbon—studied his face. The next she said, very gently:

"Again, I thank you from my heart. Now we must gallop home. Aunt Virginia will expect me early, for Mrs. Dent's musicale to-night."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PRESIDENT, BY PISTOL SHOT.

WHEN Latham left Colonel White, and strode toward the presidential mansion, it required all his will to coerce his brain to some thought of the grave matters he must consider in the coming interview. Will, sense of duty, and self-respect combined against memory; but his brain would whirl in a chaos of ideas, through which, spite of every effort, floated that faded knot of ribbon—proof to him now of his very worst suspicions. But, by supreme effort of will, he forced his mind to that strange course of destiny—or of chance?—which had carried Andrew Johnson to the highest office in the gift of the nation. In early life a tailor for many years, at the town of Greenville, Tennessee, that crude but vigorous North Carolinian had developed traits which could but command the respect even of an ultra Southerner. Wholly self-educated, without the aid of even common schools, he had forced his way, through every grade of civic office and state legislature, to the national congress; and, elected to it as a democrat, in 1843, had served for five successive terms. Thence he had been twice governor of Tennessee, leaving the chair only to take one in the United States senate;

and to become there the pronounced and bitter Unionist, whose choice for vice president in 1864 was plain political sequence of his appointment as military governor of his state, two years previous to that date.

Essentially a self-made man, Andrew Johnson was a born politician; and his sleepless ambition was backed by indomitable energy and will, and by that rare power of biding his time. Yet his wildest dreams, perhaps, had never brought this final verification of the truism that "All things come to him who waits." But his opportunity came with that alarm of the ultra party, inspired by the candidacy of that pure and popular soldier—believed by the masses of the North to be a martyr to prejudice—George B. McClellan. Republican leaders eagerly cast about for a Southern Unionist for second place on the Lincoln ticket; and availability pointed straight to Andrew Johnson as the only possible Southern republican.

Then—following the few weeks that he occupied the second chair—came the hideous and senseless crime which deprived the whole nation of its head and of its hope, and riveted the shackles about the wrists of one half of it. And then the hand that had patched breeches on the village bench took firm grasp of the helm of state, at that moment of stress and storm, most critical of any in our history.

As much as any man in the land, Mr. Johnson had felt the scourging whips of sectional prejudice in his own person. Misjudgment, invective and opprobrious epithet had been hurled at him, not only in his

native and adopted states, but from all their sisters of the South; and their echoes had traveled far north of the imaginary division line;

Returning not to bless, but deeply damn,

with exceptional virulence of party method. He had been denounced not only as a traitor to his section, but an enemy to his country; and there was sufficient force in some of the counts of the indictment to make them all rankle the more bitterly. For Andrew Johnson was by no means a perfect character in private, any more than he was a truly great one in public. He was one product of that stormy period of *ante-bellum* politics, succeeding the repeal of the Missouri compromise; and, in his time, he doubtless had been an arrant demagogue. But cold, clear-headed and watchful, he had nerve sufficient to sink the person in the politician; and it is probable that spite had far less to do with the changes of his career than had careful judgment, veered by the steady set of selfish ambition.

None could allege, however, that the president had been inconsistent in his devotion to the Union, from his first stand against secession; nor had he lacked the courage to maintain his rights, when he once believed he knew them. And now, Latham recalled the first and only time that he had seen the president. He had chanced at Montgomery, the "Cradle of the Confederacy," at the moment the Third Alabama regiment departed for Virginia. This *corps d'élite* was made up of "crack" volunteer companies from Alabama cities; and it went forth with drum beats

and sentiment and high hopes—later echoed by wailing and despair in many an Alabama mansion—in late April of 1861. Latham accompanied “the boys,” himself a stripling truant from school; and on that train he took his first object lesson in political war.

Tennessee had not yet seceded, but hung in the sensitive balance as “a doubtful state;” so at Dalton, beyond her lines, the men were especially cautioned by their officers that they were about to pass across “neutral ground;” and strict orders were given for prudence, quiet and avoidance of any possible overt act. But at Knoxville, it was learned that Andrew Johnson had been making a pro-Union speech that day at a station above, and that the soldiers’ train would pass his within an hour. Again the officers warned the Alabamians; enjoining absolute silence, as the trains passed. This order was obeyed by the men in the front cars; but those behind them, catching sight of the great and hated Tennessean, sent up a wild howl of derision, hate and devilry which their comrades could not resist. High over steam and wheels—spite of the quickly blown and continued whistles of both engines—went up a cry which made even that fearless publicist turn pale, as Andrew Johnson dashed by, sitting silent, but with his hat pulled far down over his face. No indignity was offered, beyond that vocal reprobation; but that was bitter, wild and vengeful enough to be considered the true sire of every succedent “rebel yell.” *

* This incident is literally true; described by an eye witness.

The bitterness and severity of Mr. Johnson's earlier course against the states lately in rebellion, was not a source of surprise to those who had studied his record; but these were astounded at its radical change under the seeming honest impulse of duty he believed he owed to his high position, and the oath he had taken on assuming it. In place of bitter vindictiveness had come the firmly asserted intent to protect the conquered section from illegal congressional aggression; and Southern men, especially such as Latham, found it easy to obtain access to the head of the nation. For the young Virginian—following the wiser teachings of advanced thinkers like Wade Hampton—was not only ready to accept the results of the war as final, but also to make best endeavor to use the delicate and uncertain situation for the greatest attainable common good. But such Southerners as approached Andrew Johnson soon learned that they must have something to say beyond personal gain, flattery or flippant commonplace, if they desired a second interview with the baited and overworked executive.

As Latham waited his audience, he noted that neither the corridors of the White House nor the rooms he glanced into, gave much evidence of neatness or care. It was plain that the president had too much on his mind just then to waste thought on domestic economy of his household; and this proof of absorption in weighty affairs, perhaps, fixed his own excited mind now calmly upon them. So he was cool and earnest, when the private secretary

announced that he could enter the private cabinet of the arbiter of much he had at heart.

As he did so, a man of ordinary mould, to the casual glance, rose from a desk littered with piles of documents, and welcomed him with a curt nod. The form was that of one in preserved middle life, of medium height, thickset, and still showing vigorous strength and active energy. The full face was strong, but smooth, speaking firmness of resolve and indomitable self-reliance; and the broad, square brow was overhung by careless locks of iron gray hair. A shade of care and annoyance was on the president's face, clouding it as though his last visitor had left no very pleasant impression. But he spoke courteously, if bluntly, as Latham returned his salutation:

"I am glad to see you, sir, as an honest Virginian."

"Thank you, Mr. President," Latham replied. "I fully appreciate your promptness in granting me an interview."

"It is not a matter of grace, sir. These things are mutual," Mr. Johnson answered. "It is no less a relief than it is a necessity to meet men like yourself; men who have no private axes to grind and are not seeking office for themselves, or friends. Did you notice the man who left me just as you entered? Well, he is a Union man from Tennessee. He claims to have so suffered and sacrificed himself for the cause of principle—and possibly he speaks the truth—that he deserves to be made a saint. But, as I cannot do that for him, he demands the best paying office in my gift, within his district. I presume you have found out that patriotism has an eye open to

pay, in these times on which we have fallen. Love of country is not satisfying to any Southern loyalist, unless accompanied by an office. The fatter the office, the bluer his loyalty!"*

"I doubt not that there is much unselfish patriotism left in this country, Mr. President," the Virginian answered, "but I doubt, also, if most of it centers in Washington."

"You are right, sir; perfectly right!" the president exclaimed. "God knows I am trying to deal justly by the whole country. But there are grave matters which must largely be left to readjust themselves, before we can heal the wounds made by the Rebellion! You see, sir—every honest man must see—on what quibbles congress endeavors to thwart my every effort to the real end!"

"It was upon that very point I desired to speak to you, sir," Latham replied. "I wish to ascertain truly what chance the people of Virginia—of course I mean the white people—have to get control of affairs, which they alone can control."

"The suffrage, as now existent—disfranchisement for cause and without cause—are the obstacles to surmount, sir. Your people will have to bide their time, Mr. Latham; and they, in common with those of the whole South, must muzzle their demagogues. If the leaders will not be discreet from principle—damn it, sir! the followers must force them to be so, from policy!"

"I am deeply curious about the outcome of congressional obstruction," Latham said, gravely.

*Andrew Johnson's own words.

"Of course you are! The whole country must be so," Mr. Johnson retorted quickly. "But you cannot expect me to know more of it than you, or any honest man. I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet; and I would be probably the last man to get the real truth, from anyone who comes to me. It has grown to a political principle that the proper lie, well stuck to, will serve better! But one thing you can depend upon, sir," the president rose, locking his hands behind him, and facing his visitor frankly, "I will do the best that is in me to protect the states lately in rebellion in their reserved rights. State's rights now become a matter of national rights; but congress has come to believe that all rights begin in one wing of the capitol and end in the other. Northern people are now instructed to think that you of the South, who took part in the Rebellion, have no political rights; but, in that phrase they include all rights—civil, social and personal!"

"I realize that fully, sir," Latham answered. "But with us in Virginia, just now, social and personal rights are the Aaron's rod, that swallows all the rest."

"Why, sir," the president went on, "immediately after the peace, a bare minority of republican members was clamorous to relegate every secession state to a territorial form of government. I may have had some *sentiment* that way myself; for I tell you, Mr. Latham,"—the speaker began to walk the room slowly, keeping his eyes on his hearer,—“in the first intoxication of success, we were a set of damned fools! But reason soon set sentiment aside; for how

could we keep that Union, for which we had spent so much blood and more treasure, by putting out now those we had just whipped in—whom we had persistently declared had no right to go out?”

“The congressional paradox seems to be, Mr. President: ‘Preserve the Union, by destroying it!’”

“Precisely, Mr. Latham. Damn it, sir! those ultras in congress are the new secesh! But, sir, the sturdy common sense of this country will permit no such legislated suicide when it shall have had the time to reach upon blatant greed for re-election; and meantime, I shall meet every move they make against the just rights of the states by showing them the vital rights of the Union!”

The president was deeply in earnest, evidently; but he showed no excitement, in face or gesture, further than his restless walk and occasional lapse into habitual—if not most dignified—forms of speech. Deep refinement was not the forte of the president, perhaps; but “scratching him with a pin” was not proved to be a safe operation, so perhaps no man knew how deep below Andrew Johnson’s cuticle was to be found “the Tartar.” Suddenly he stopped in front of his visitor; unclasped the hands behind him, and said simply:

“But all talk is dry. Mr. Latham, will you try a glass of sherry? Or, do you prefer a nip of good old Tennessee whisky?” He pointed to a small ante-room, as he added: “I will vouch for its ‘loyalty,’ sir; but that need not offend a sensible man.”

Realizing that it was not every day that a freshly reconstructed rebel was asked to drink with the head

of the new nation, Latham promptly accepted; and, still standing in the ante-room, Mr. Johnson went on gravely:

"Ah! you like it, sir? Now we can look at the situation with more equanimity. Do you know what will be the outcome of this struggle, as far as I am personally concerned?"

"It will end by your ability to teach the congress some reason, I hope," was the frank reply.

"No, sir! It is too soon after the war for calm reason to win, I am confident. It will end in a determined effort to put me out of the White House, sir! And I tell you that effort will be made before many months. You can go back and tell your people that Andrew Johnson will be president of the United States, so long as he is president at all. They may make a new rebellion in Washington, sir; but so far as my office is concerned, the old rebellion is over! And those states, lately in it, shall have their rights to the full extent that they are given by the statute law and the decisions of the supreme court!"

"And you really believe that the house of representatives will endeavor to impeach you, Mr. President?"

"Why not? The republican majority find me the sole obstacle in the path to perpetuation of party rule, through negro suffrage and disfranchisement of ex-rebels like yourself! The earth belongs to the saints of the Lord, Mr. Latham; and the majority alone are saints. And a damned nice collection of saints that is, at the other end of the avenue, sir!"

"And you really believe in the attempt, sir?" the Virginian again asked, earnestly.

"That is precisely what I mean to say, sir. They will do it if they dare, and just as soon as they dare. They will try to shift the real cause to this War Department muddle. I do not believe that they can make General Grant a nose of wax in their dirty fingers, sir; but Stanton is a good enough Morgan. If they do not ride him to death, he will be their war horse. They have mounted him for a hobby, already."

"But your friends in the house? Surely they can prevent so extreme a measure?" Latham queried.

"They are scarcely enough, at present, even to make a respectable fight, where so many diverse personal interests will enter into it," the president replied thoughtfully, seemingly as much to himself as to his listener. "Congress, at this moment, is like the handle of a jug; pretty much on one side. But, sir, I will not detain you with personal complaints. You need have no anxiety about this matter. I shall manage to weather this storm. Let them who made it look to their own safety! But, sir, go back to your people and tell them that, if the man sinks, the principle that carried him down will rise again. As for your people, tell them they must look to their own life-preservers. Warn them to keep quiet and take no rash steps; to perform every political and public duty possible; and, where disfranchised, to petition congress constantly for removal of disabilities. If this congress refuses, the next one may not.

In a short while you will have your chance, sir ; and then I hope to see your people use it with more common sense than the South has usually shown when her opportunities came ! Good-bye, sir ; and remember to tell your people the truth ! ”

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

MRS. DANDRIDGE and Stella Latham were frequent—and deeply interested—visitors to the senate gallery in those days, so fraught with meaning to them; for the future of their loved South hung in the sensitive balance.

The struggle was well on, between that imperious congress which brooked no interference with its will, and the executive who had turned back to the earlier paths of his political life. And in that gallery—while Latham talked to the president—the two ladies met Mrs. Dent, an acknowledged “leader” in the new society of the capital. Young, handsome and very rich—by recent marriage to an ex-contractor, fat in both senses—Mrs. Dent’s claim to lead was accepted by grace of terrapin, and sealed by the green wax of her wine. For few indeed troubled themselves, in those days, as to how any man came by his money, so long as he spent it freely; and the present specimen was wholly regardless of its lavish use by his new wife. He was proud of her beauty, and of her knack for drawing about her notables of all shades; and the *cara sposa* herself, while a notable lion-hunter, was frank, genial and peculiarly independent. She openly

declared "Southern people decidedly superior;" avowing herself thoroughly sick of political bias in social matters, and "tired to death of having the greatness of loyalty thrust in one's face."

"Your people have thoroughly good style, my dear," she had said to Stella. "They understand the *convenances*, and do not bore me with *gaucheries*, like the politicians and their squaws! Take that grand Mrs. Craig, for example; there's no woman like her in our society to-day. Mamma says she was the leader of the senatorial set, *ante bellum*." But Mrs. Dent omitted to add that mamma's knowledge came through fitting Mrs. Craig's dresses in those aristocratic days. "But, don't you dare forget, my dear. You and Mrs. Dandridge belong to me this evening. Only a little affair—some ninety people; but I want you to meet Mrs. Craig, and hear her marvelous niece! Such a beauty and—*such a voice*! Ah! senator, you could not resist our presence? But we all three came hoping to hear *you* speak. You know Mrs. Dandridge—and Miss Latham? Staunch rebels both, so beware what you say, if *you* reply to Mr. Green. And, senator, you *must* come this evening. I've caged another Southern song-bird, almost equal to Miss Latham!"

"You mean Miss Freeman, Mrs. Dent? She has done in three weeks, Miss Latham, what your General Lee failed in for four years. She has captured Washington."

"Yes; and our invulnerable mutual, Colonel White, has surrendered to her, rescue or no rescue!" Mrs. Dent ran on. "I only wish that delightful brother

of yours were in town,—What? He is! Then warn him that Dent will never say Virginia again, unless he comes with you! Ah! there's Dent now, at the cloak-room door. Senator, will you take me down? *Au revoir!* I'll count on you both—and that brother!" And the leader swept away, radiant, on the senator's arm.

At dinner, Latham tried to refuse, pleading business; but Mrs. Dandridge overruled the plea; and soon the party of four—for Mr. Dandridge was permitted to count in that strange household—were rolling toward Mrs. Dent's gorgeous palace, in the newest Northwest end.

Latham found himself in an alcove, with a bright society girl, who turned up a fine Grecian nose, at its present mixture.

"But having lived here always, you must know everybody, Miss Merritt," he said.

"No! my guardian angel is merciful," she answered. "There are cases where ignorance is bliss, indeed! I am a Yankee, and all my sympathies were on the Northern side; but I cannot blind myself to the plain fact that the struggle to save our Union has thrown some strange elements into our society."

"War is ever a great demoralizer," he answered, "especially civil war. But, perhaps you think I should say 'rebellion?'"

"Not at all," she laughed. "I am Union to the core, but do not sit at the feet of Thaddeus Stevens or Ben Wade. I can leave history to settle the name, now that we have won. But you did not come to

hear politics, and there is something far better. Listen!"

"I agree with you," he answered, lightly, though with a proud smile. "But I hear that as often as politics. Mrs. Dent is showing off my sister Stella; but she seems to be singing 'against her record!'"

"Or her rival, possibly. But let us go nearer," Miss Merritt added. "I must hear that song."

It was the "Jewel Song" of the then new "Faust;" and the music was "just in" Miss Latham's voice. Run, cadenza, sustained note—every phrase was clear, pure and rounded as strung pearls. At the finale, general applause from gloved hands was led by Colonel White; and, leaning over her, he asked the singer something. Again the Virginia girl sang; this time an even more difficult selection, from "La Juive." But, as she finished, Miss Merritt's exclamation was stopped by a stately, beautiful woman, of middle age, leaning on the arm of Baron Grosswig, a noted diplomat.

"Ah, dear Miss Merritt!" she said pleasantly. "I had a triumph this morning. I captured your papa, horse, foot and dragoons! He promises to support us, with his whole delegation."

"Dear, good papa! He knows society scripture: 'Parents, obey your children,' Mrs. Craig," the society girl answered. "When you captured his daughter, so long ago, papa could do nothing else. But, permit me to present a compatriot of yours; Mrs. Craig—Mr. Latham, of Virginia."

"There are few strangers to Colonel Latham at the South," the elder lady answered, with slight

accent on the title. "We must shake hands, colonel; for your mother and I were friends, in 'the good old days.' I was just saying to the baron—Colonel Latham, Monsieur le Baron von Grosswig!—that I must ask presentation to that charming sister of yours."

"She haf sink moosic een heer soul!" the diplomat averred, with hand upon his heart. "I veel now preesent madame—"

As they passed toward the piano, Stella rose, speaking to a tall girl by her. Standing with her back to them, the other showed magnificent neck and arms—not niggardly displayed by cut of corsage; and, bowing her stately head, she sat at the piano and played the prelude to Beethoven's "Adelaide," singing it in truly artistic style.

"She sings wonderfully well," Miss Merritt said to Latham. "Do you know her? She is a stranger to me."

"And to me, of course, as an outside barbarian," he answered, as a crowd closed between them and the singer. "Some noted professional, possibly; Mrs. Dent affects them, you know."

There were murmured requests; then the clear, rich voice sang another German ballad; and then the senator of the morning preferred a request.

"Ah! senator, you overpower me," the singer laughed. "But I could not possibly! I would have to be a brass band and chorus in one, to sing 'The Star Spangled Banner'!"

"Aw, weally, you're wight, ye know," lisped young Savile Rowe, of her majesty's legation. "Nawtional

anthems are geneuwallly wot, weally. Sing us something you used to sing duwing the webellion, ye know."

Without reply the woman touched the keys; and next instant Latham seemed to hear a different—but never forgotten voice, as she sang "The dew is on the blossom." And—whether from "psychicforce," who may guess?—he seemed to see a distant crest, through a dimity-draped window; a framed "Declaration of Independence" hanging above the singer, as her now trained voice gave the homely words:

I'll be sighing for you, dearest.

Will you ever sigh for me?

The brilliant company and gorgeous furniture dissolved before his eyes; the glaring chandeliers became soft moonlight, under memory's spell; and Beverly Latham stood again, in the little cottage parlor, as Jen Freeman sang that ballad of—how long ago!

"Really, Mr. Latham, I had no idea I was such a narcotic!" Miss Merritt laughed. "I have spoken to you three times without reply; even when I volunteered to get you an introduction."

"Apology will seem needless," he answered, hastily, "when I tell you that song was once sung often by—a friend,—now dead to me! Thanks for your offer, but I see that Miss Freeman has left—"

"Miss Freeman! So that is the new beauty? But I understood you to say she was a stranger to you?"

"She is—a perfect stranger," he answered, gravely. "But I recognize her voice."

Just then Mrs. Dent bore down upon them, and he hailed in her an angel of light, as she cried:

"I looked everywhere, to introduce you, Colonel Latham. But now, *you must* sing! I won't take no for answer. Then we'll hunt up that wicked Mr. Rowe, who has eloped with my new star!"

Latham protested that he was ill, out of practice, knew nothing; but Mrs. Dent was a manager who took no excuses from her corps; and he consented, when Miss Merritt volunteered accompaniment. "Il Balen" and "The Vagabonds," in his rich sympathetic baritone, brought new demands; but the senator had captured Miss Merritt, and Stella was just leaving the room with Colonel White. So, impelled by what feeling he himself could not have told, he sat down and sang—as he had never sung it before—Schubert's "Last Greeting."

And the Hon. Savile Rowe,—lisping commonplace under a spreading camelia in the near conservatory, stared and polished his monocle afresh, as Jen Freeman sat,—without reply, but with flushed cheeks and parted lips,—hearing those familiar words:

Adieu! There comes a morrow,
To every day of pain;
We part, to-night in sorrow—
To meet in bliss again!

To her—as late to her lover—the old song swept the present resistlessly aside; and memory's "Persian carpet" bore her, through space and time, back to that little parlor—still home to her heart!

For Jen Freeman had never heard of her old lover,

since their parting after the battle; nor was she the girl to let romance and imagination run riot. So, she drew no fancy pictures of his prowess and his new loves; merely striving to banish all memory of him who had played with and despised her; who had—perhaps unwittingly—been cause of all her woes, and of her flight from them and home! And, with a character like hers,—quick to take the impress of higher surroundings—several years of study and travel could work vast change. “Auntie” had been generous and blockade ventures prosperous; so she had profited by best advantages, and the woman, now waiting her father’s advent at the capital, was linguist, musician and society girl of the higher sort. The mountain daisy had been replaced by the well opened rose.

But—during the minutes of the remembered song, she was the daisy once more; and the far-away eyes, flushed cheeks and parted lips, half repeating the words, all told that memory of the old days—and of him who now called them back—was neither dead, nor very soundly sleeping.

But, in a tithe the time this telling takes—all this had passed away. Miss Freeman—all pose and society again—was detailing a recent Crystal Palace concert to Mr. Rowe, when Mrs. Dent bore down upon her with the singer of “The Last Greeting.”

“So I have found the fair runaway. Miss Freeman, I wish to present Colonel Latham!” Mrs. Dent gushed. “He is dying to know you, naturally; kindred spirits, in rebellion and in music! Mr.

Rowe, you shall do penance for monopolizing *la belle des belles*, by escorting an old lady!"

Mrs. Dent's rattling gush of speech gave man and woman time to adjust shield and brace lance, for this unexpected encounter; and, as she sailed away with the captured *attaché*, each intuitively recognized the other's feeling—without analysis of their own. But it was the woman who spoke first:

"A most unexpected meeting, Colonel Latham. I really did not dream you were in Washington."

"Assuredly not," he answered, quietly. "You put my modesty to great strain, for it to presume that I were in your thoughts at any time."

"Why not?" she replied, with perfect manner. "I have not grown old enough to lose my memory; and you were once—an acquaintance!"

"You compliment me too much, now," he answered, somewhat piqued, "by even remembering that. So many of those acquaintances were like enlistments;—'for three years, or the war'."

"Then my memory must have 'repealed the substitute act'," she answered, as lightly as though speaking of the weather; but her eyes were full on his, as she continued with unchanged inflection: "For I recall perfectly the last words you ever said to me, commonplace as they were."

"Do you recall them," he asked, quickly, "to suggest their paraphrase now to 'Good-night, Miss Freeman'?"

"Not at all," she answered sweetly, and with unchanged face; but he could not see the slim hand shut dangerously on the frail fan, or the little foot

press hard upon the floor. "Why should I? You had perfect right to correct my idle boast by proving that your memory was as good as mine!"

The shock of the first tilt had passed, and Jen sat firmly in saddle, the fragments of his lance at her feet. But the man reeled with the recoil, blushing hotly as he reached for the mace of accusation:

"Do you say that in contempt—or pity?"

"Neither!" she replied, with the slightest elevation of her arched eyebrows. "Why should I pity so excellent a society trait? And I am sure Colonel Latham could never imagine himself as an object of—contempt!"

"If you did not know I was here, why did you sing the old song?" he retorted, with boyish want of tact; and there was just a tinge of irony in the reply:

"Because Mr. Rowe asked for something of my simple war days; and, surely, nothing could be simpler than those words!"

Even if he knew that he was getting badly worsted in the encounter, the perfect pose of his antagonist so chafed him, that he fell into petulance:

"Pardon the absurdity of my question, pray," he said, "but, with your excellence of memory, you must recall that I always did absurd things!"

"Yes, but people are so apt to change, Colonel Latham," she answered simply, accepting his speech without denial. "You have—in voice and method. You never sang the Schubert so well as to-night."

The blow caught him in mid-shield; so fairly that he reeled blindly, crying out:

"I sang it because I—" But he stopped short; blustering like a weak boy.

"Because it is pure, simple music, that you learned in pure and simple days," Jen Freeman finished for him. "But, *I* had not asked *why*; only complimented the way in which you sang. Permit me to do the same for Miss Latham. She is truly an artist; and I was surprised, although I had already heard of her power from—Colonel White!"

The quietly courteous speech ignored all previous knowledge of his family. But the name she used brought up the ribbon—the cripple's story—the midnight figure in white, so vividly that they seared into his now hot brain. And the cold, impassive face of the woman before him—so contrasting with that of the generous, impulsive girl of his past—contrasting still more with the fever of regret, longing and injured pride, now raging within him—swept away the last remnants of his self-possession:

"You insist that we *are* strangers!" in low, rapid tones, tremulous with deep passion. "So be it! I have yielded long since—with what grace I might—to a prior feeling!" He paused; but the woman made no movement to reply. Then, reckless and under sway of his mixed emotions, he blundered on: "It must be delightful to meet your old admirers, so conveniently situated here! You must enjoy renewal of such old *affaires*, as were not 'for three years, or the war!'"

"You must pardon my dullness," was the perfectly calm reply, "but I do not understand you!"

"Indeed? Then the dullness must be mine," he retorted, hotly. "Or, abroad perhaps you studied with Delsarte, too; acting, as well as music!"

"I have never studied *double entendre*, Colonel Latham," she answered, coldly, but decisively. "If your words are meant to cover some taunt, I repeat I do *not* understand you!"

"Curiosity is a woman's weakness, they say," he went on angrily, "but I confess to it now! Would you consider it indiscreet did I ask when, and where, you first met Colonel White?"

"I should not; merely rather curious," she answered. "I met him first at Mrs. Craig's, in Georgetown, two weeks ago."

"For the first time?" His eyes were blazing into hers.

The grand shoulders, gleaming white above her low corsage, moved with an almost imperceptible shrug, but she bowed her stately head gravely, as she replied:

"I said so, Colonel Latham; for the first time. And now, if my examination is—"

But he broke in, heedless now of all but his own overmastering thought:

"Then, how did he carry through the war a souvenir you gave him?"

"After my reply, your question is scarcely a courteous one," she said, slowly. "It is certainly wholly unfounded on fact!"

"That ribbon of yours he wore!" the man went on, with unrepressed passion. "The one we divided at your gate—part of which I have never left out of

my keeping one instant since! He thrust his hand in his breast, drawing out the locket. "Where is the other half of this?"

At his act, a strange smile came to the girl's lips, that had more of yearning pity than of anger in it; and the eyes she fastened upon that faded knot, which her own fingers had tied there—were moist with memory and something tenderer far. But the man was blind to all save his own suspicion; deaf to all but the words, and not the meaning, when she answered in low and gentle voice:

"Were not everything between us so very strange, now—your question might seem so strange, that I might well decline to answer! But why should I, when the answer is so simple?"

She half turned from him and—quickly carrying her hand to her bosom—held out the ribbon.

Eagerly, wide-eyed with amaze,—his cheeks burning with shame and contrition,—Beverly Latham leaned forward and examined the well-remembered fragment. His glance—moving from it to the one he held—noted each fray and zig-zag of the ends, severed by his knife. For an instant he stood, as one dazed; then joy and triumph began to brighten in his eyes. The next, they hardened to a scowl again and he half-gasped:

"Then it was not he—but the *other* one—that night!"

Jen Freemun turned quickly on him, drawn up to her full height, her head raised proudly.

"Colonel Latham," she said, very coldly, "I said

just now that I *did not* understand you. This time, I hope that I do not!"

"Answer me once more!" he went on, as though not hearing her; his voice half taunt—half obsecration. "Tell me *why* you went to Europe! Why you left your father and your home, after swearing that you would not!"

A shade swept over the woman's face, and her lips pressed firmly together. Once or twice her bosom rose and fell, as to break unbearable restraint of her corsage. But the struggle was over in a moment; for she answered quietly:

"I left home at papa's urgency: because he willed it so!"

"And for—*nothing* else?" he asked quickly.

A deep, red disc rose to either cheek and stood there; but she looked full into his hot, suspicious eyes, as she said slowly:

"I have answered strange questions honestly, Colonel Latham, because of old acquaintance. I should *not* have answered, had I dreamed they were inspired by anything you could possibly have heard of me—and believed!"

"And if I *did* hear, without seeking—"

She stopped him; this time with an imperious gesture—the red discs growing on her cheeks—her bosom heaving unrestrained:

"Stop, sir! I have asked no confessions from you! I will hear none! It is equally indifferent to me what you have believed—what heard!"

"But, if I not only *heard*," he answered with a half groan. "If I saw—with my own eyes! You

remember that midnight, when you went stealthily—quietly—to meet—”

“Beverly Latham, I *pity* you!” The woman’s voice cut into his wild utterance, low and slow; but the command in it silenced him. “From a stranger, such doubts, and so expressed, would be coarse insolence! From a Southern officer to a Southern woman they are the insult of—a coward! Good-night, Colonel Latham!”

She turned her back full on him; moving slowly away, between the ranged plants. The man—crushed more by his own conflicting passions, than by her words—followed her only with his blazing eyes; standing motionless, rooted to the spot. But those eyes did not see the slender hand close over the frail fan, snapping it as an eggshell.

But—clearly sweet as a bell-chime at midnight, Latham heard the soft society voice replace the late indignant surge, as she met someone, and said:

“Were you coming for me, Colonel White?—Thanks, I am ready!”

CHAPTER XXV.

A SUDDEN COUP.

To the three days succeeding Mrs. Dent's ball, Beverly Latham ever looked back as the most miserable ones of his life. Drunken with passion, doubt and jealousy—as he too late confessed to himself—he had spoken his first unmanly word to a woman; and he despised himself thoroughly for it, though thought only added confusion to his brain. Not once did he doubt that there were grounds for his suspicion; for belief born of that error on his midnight watch, and of the old cripple's report. He had convinced himself now of Jen's double flirtations, as completely as she had long ago believed he had trifled with her. And between these two errors, now yawned a gulf that never could be bridged. But one thing Latham felt due to himself, no less than to her sex—lightly as she might have held its best prerogatives; and he had promptly despatched a note of regret for the manner of his speech. It had no sorrow for the doubts he had expressed, no retraction of the charges made; but merely hoped that “Miss Freeman could forgive and forget the only occasion when he had overlooked what was due to any woman.”

The same messenger brought two lines of reply: "Miss Freeman might forgive errors of ignorance, but her memory is as good as Colonel Latham's; and she hopes, always founded upon facts."

But, having sent this, the woman shut the matter up in her own heart, along with fragments of broken hope, memory and bittersorrow; breathing no word of the chance meeting to Mrs. Craig, and going on her round of visits, dinners and balls with the same grace and the same apparent pleasure that had marked her brief career of belleship at the capital.

But Latham walked through pressing round of duty, as a man in a dream; kept punctually engagements involving safety or ruin to others and great interests to himself; filing and explaining papers with direct business tact. But still, permeating all his busy hours, and monopolizing those he should have given to Stella, or to rest, stalked the ghost of a dead past, led through the inferno of the present by the hand of a hopeless shade of his own raising.

Pleading business as excuse for refusing invitations and absenting himself from home, he had scarcely seen Stella in the interim. But, on that third morning she came to him—affectionate, considerate about his overworking, and prettily saucy as ever—but with a nervousness he could not comprehend, until she suddenly said:

"I wish to go back home, bud, at once! How soon can you go?"

"To-night, I hope!" he answered. "God knows I am sick of this city, with its shams and disappointments."

"I am so glad, bud! I want to get back to our own roof—to mamma. I have not breathed one word to Betty; but"—a vivid blush overspread her fine face—"last night Colonel White told me that—"

"And you accepted him!" he cried, suddenly.

"No Latham ever accepted a suitor save under her own roof," she answered, haughtily. "Colonel Latham must forget that I am his mother's daughter! No, bud, I have not accepted him; but Colonel White will come home at once"—she looked bravely at him now; a soft glory on her face—"to get that answer his own heart must have had from mine!"

"But you do not know this man, Stella!"

"I know that you presented him to me," she answered, quietly. "I know he has family, noble character, position and a gallant record! What more need I seek to know?"

"Nothing, I suppose," he said, perplexed. "But his past—his previous love affairs?"

"He has had none," she retorted, confidently. "Since his boyish follies, I am the only woman he has loved."

"*He* told you this?"

"He did, last night. And I—believe him!"

"We will go back home, to-night, sister," he answered solemnly, as he kissed her flushed brow. "We will discuss this at home."

"Of course, I shall discuss it—with mamma," she answered, calmly. "But, Bev., I am a Latham, and my mind is made up."

"You are a woman, and my elder sister," he said, trying to smile. But there was a chill at his heart,

lest the shadow of his own dark suspicion must fall across her bright way.

But *had* Jen spoken truly? Was it not really White whom she had met at the gate, that night? If not, how had he later got that ribbon, in the hot race from Forrest? And she had it, on her own heart at the ball— Suddenly he recalled that she had ridden with White that very evening! Despising himself for it, he listened as the shade that tormented him drew nearer, whispering that the man and girl boldly and openly kept up the old affair; that, with another's kisses on his lips, he had lied to a daughter of the Lathams! His hand clinched at thought of such insult; but, inconsistent as man ever is—he forgot another insult, graver and more gross, given to the woman he himself had twice sworn he loved above all others! But he kept silent; only adding:

“Yes, sister; we will go home to-night.”

But, as “man proposes,” there is somewhat of truth in the cynical French turn of the proverb: “*Mais, le diable dispose—quelquefois!*”

As Latham left the house, a messenger handed him a brief note from the Department of Justice, in which the judge courteously asked “the favor of his presence, at noon,” that day. Sending a verbal reply, and wondering what new devilry was up now, he hastened through other business and was prompt to the minute. He was greeted with effusive courtesy, foreign usually to the cold and contained chief, who introduced:

“Mr. Screws—of Middletown & Screws, New York; our friend, Colonel Latham, of Virginia.”

The titles—colonel and friend, equally—made Latham stare; for the official had always studiously emphasized the *Mr.*, before that moment.

“I sent for you on a matter of no moment to yourself, Colonel Latham,” the judge said. “But your unselfish work for others emboldened me. You told me lately that you knew, and could vouch for, Mr. Philip Freeman, of Alabama.”

“I believe I did,” Latham replied; thinking rather of daughter than of sire. “What possible charge can be laid against that poor old man?”

“He is not a ‘poor’ old man, Colonel Latham; if you can assist us—ahem!—if you can disprove these charges, but will be a very rich one!” Mr. Screws put in glibly.

Messrs. Middletown & Screws were early specimens of that species known as “the promoter;” the fungus growth of which later ran, like wiregrass, through Southern soil, wherever its promise of mineral, timber or agricultural wealth was sufficient to pay the middleman; wherever its waste places were possible to make blossom like the bay, with railways, parks and cities—on paper. So Mr. Screws turned over the phrase, as succulent:

“Yes, a very rich one. Our firm has almost closed a sale and partnership in mineral lands with—ahem!—with parties in interest, which will make Mr. Freeman a very rich man, unless—”

“The charges are serious ones,” the judge broke in, with a warning glance at the speaker. “They are in form and writing, alleging that Philip Freeman is the head of the Ku-Klux Klan, of his section!”

Latham smiled in spite of the judge's tone, at the suggestion of Farmer Freeman wild careering at the head of his black-masked riders; but he said:

"These charges are so supremely absurd—so absolutely impossible—that I would pledge my life on their falsity! May I see them—"

"Certainly," Mr. Screws broke in with his chipper fashion, reaching for a file on the desk. But again the chief checked him by a look, as a clerk entered and handed him a card.

"One moment, please," he said to Mr. Screws. "McFadden, admit Mr. Freeman."

Next moment the old Alabamian had entered the room; cool, quiet and sturdy as of yore but, Latham saw, with more puckers pinched into his face by Time's fingers. Ignoring the presence of all else, he advanced frankly to Latham and held out his hand, as he cried:

"Well, I *am* glad to see you, lieutenant! It's several years since we met, but I never forget friends. Jen's here, visiting her aunt, Mrs. Craig. Have you met?"

Latham took the proffered hand with some constraint, replying that he had met Miss Freeman for a moment only; but the judge made a memorandum of Mrs. Craig's name on his pad, as he said:

"You are Mr. Philip Freeman, of Alabama? Be seated, sir. You know Mr. Screws, perhaps?"

"I should say I do, judge!" the farmer replied bluntly. "And I guess I ought to know you, too, if the report was—"

"The question now in point," the great man broke in hastily, touching his gong as he spoke, "is a more serious one. McFadden, was Mr. John Holden summoned for noon?"

"Yes, sir; he was ill," the clerk replied. "But he sent word that he would come, if—a—"

"Well, sir! If what?" the judge demanded, curtly.

"If—a—'if hell froze over,' sir, was his message!"

"Very well, McFadden, that will do! Send him in as soon as he arrives."

The clerk withdrew and, almost immediately, John Holden's tall form filled the doorway. But a strange change had come over the grim old man. His keen green eyes seemed dulled, and their bushy brows contracted, as though from pain; the long, firm underjaw—grisly and unshaven—set hard against its fellow; and the great chest heaved irregularly. He gazed at the unexpected forms of Freeman and Latham, with eyes that had the ugly gleam of the owl's at dusk; but suddenly one great hand went to his side, and the other clutched the door frame for support.

"I regret to learn of your illness, Mr. Holden," the judge said. "But, as it was essential to consider your charges promptly, I sent for you."

"I hain't complainin', be I?" Holden answered grimly, sinking heavily into a seat. "I hez stud more'n thet, fur ther flag, fur fo' long year. I'm yere now, ter test' 'gin thet pizen rebul thar, hain't I?"

Half rising, Freeman was about to reply; but Latham—noting his movement and his angry flush

—leaned over, whispered hastily to him, and added aloud:

“May we now examine those papers, judge?”

“Certainly. They are very plain and—ahem!—emphatic!” Mr. Screws said, handing them over, at a quiet sign from the chief.

“An’ tha’s true, fus’ an’ las’!” Holden growled.

“That is fortunate, perhaps,” the judge replied, drily. “It will simplify matters. Your proofs, of course, will be forthcoming?”

“I ben’t no fool, be I?” was the answer. “Ef I needs time ter riz ther witnisses, ’tain’t no doin’ ov mine, be it?”

“Well, I telegraphed Mr. Freeman to come at once,” Mr. Screws said, hastily. “As soon as I was notified—ahem!—*heard* of the charges, I wired. It is essential to heavy interests to close certain transactions, at once. The sooner this matter is settled, the better.”

“Yes, Mr. Holden,” the judge added; “the better for all parties.”

“I hez n’t nuthin’ ter add, hez I?” the mountaineer asked. “I hez sed my say, an’ I ’low I’ll stan’ ter ’t!”

“These papers set forth that Mr. Freeman organized the Ku-Klux Klan, in the counties of Etowah, DeKalb and elsewhere, during the past winter,” Latham said to the judge; but he turned sharply: “You can prove this, I presume, Mr. Holden?”

“Yer ben’t a-jedgin’ me, be yer?” the other answered, with a scowl. “But I ’low ez I kin prove all thet’s writ down thar!”

"But I would submit"—Latham again turned to the chief—"that these charges are worthless, void and of no effect. They state location, fact and detail, but no date, in any instance!"

"Precisely what I first pointed out when—" Mr. Screws began cheerily; but he caught the judge's glance and stopped in mid-sentence. And Holden's brows knit closer, and his face darkened—whether with pain or rage—as he turned on the speaker:

"Yer ben't a-jedgin', too, be yer? I 'low ther rebuls seems ter hev all ther law, an' loil men hain't no show!"

"That omission, Colonel Latham, while grave, is not necessarily fatal to the charges," the judge said, warily. "It might be supplied to the allegation, under oath."

"I 'low ez it kin be!" Holden cried. "Ther dates is know'd."

"Doubtless," Latham said, quickly. "For instance, you know what night Mr. Freeman was at Fort Payne?"

"And the Gadsden date, too?" Mr. Screws added.

"But, gentlemen! I'll just be darned if—" Freeman began angrily; but again Latham whispered to him earnestly, as Holden answered slowly:

"He war in Fort Payne, or ther 'bout, two night afore Chris'mus; an'—I 'low he war in Gadsding—ther nex' week."

"You are sure of that?" Mr. Screws asked.

"Yer ben't tryin' ter ketch me a lyin', be yer?" Holden growled. "I 'low John Holden don' 'clar, 'cep'n he's sho'!"



"THEM EZ THER LORD HEZ JINED—NO MAN SHELL HINDER!"—Page 337.

"You comprehend, Mr. Holden," the judge cautioned blandly, "that what you state now, you must reaffirm, under oath, at the proper time!"

A strange shadow passed across the grim face of the mountaineer. Again he pressed his hand hard to his left side; but, after a deep breath, he answered doggedly:

"John Holden hain't never tuk but one yoath in his life ez he hezn't kep'; but now—"

"But, I'll just be hanged if I—" Freeman broke in hotly, springing to his feet. But again Latham restrained him; and again Mr. Screws spoke,—quietly and slowly beyond his wont:

"There *may* be some error, judge, in the persons, or the dates, in these charges. I myself am ready to affirm that from—" he paused; consulting letters and memoranda, from his pocket—"yes; from December thirteenth until January tenth, last, Mr. Freeman was not absent one day from the late rebel works, situated on his lands far distant from both places named."

"He hain't provin' nuthin', jedge, be he?" Holder retorted eagerly. "I do 'low ther wurd ov er pizen rebul hain't no standin' 'gin ther say ov er loil man!"

"But I myself can swear it!" Mr. Screws said, quickly.

"Thet do n' mek no differ," Holden said, doggedly. "Hit hain't nuthin' 'cep'n' yoath 'gin yoath!"

"I must warn you, gentlemen," the judge said cautiously, "that the cause is not yet on for trial; but

merely on question whether it shall lie, or be dismissed."

With quivering lips and red-gleaming eyes—but hand still pressed to his side, Holden rose to his feet and glared upon his foes. Twice he strove to speak, before he muttered hoarsely:

"Dismist! Ther rebul are en ther han's ov ther Lord, at las'! Let ther trial cum!"

"I need detain you no longer, gentlemen," the judge said, rising. "I will set the formal trial for to-morrow, at noon."

"One word only," Mr. Screws said, blandly. "I omitted to mention that my partner, Mr. Middletown, will be here to affirm as I do. Between the dates I named he, as well as myself—" he looked full into Holden's fierce eyes—"were at the works, with Mr. Freeman!"

Holden dropped into his seat again, something between a curse and a groan breaking from him; his eyes dropped dully upon the carpet. Then Freeman strode one step toward him, with raised hand. But Latham seized his arm, drew it through his own and led him to the corridor, saying quietly:

"You must control yourself, Mr. Freeman, under any provocation. Perfect as your case seems, one violent act might ruin you!"

As he spoke they were joined by Mr. Screws. He had merely leaned over the table to replace the paper; but he said, very low:

"I may close the purchase now, in perfect safety?"

And the judge, speaking more with eyes and lips, than tongue, had replied:

"With perfect safety, assuredly." Then, as Mr. Screws turned away, the judge glanced uneasily at Holden: "I need detain you no longer—why, are you ill?"

"It don' mek no differ, ill nur 'nuther," the mountaineer answered, in dull voice. But, with evident effort he rose, drew a deep, gasping breath, and walked unsteadily into the ante-room.

"I congratulate you on the changed aspect of our case," Mr. Screws was saying in his most chipper style, as he overtook the pair at the stairway. "I will telegraph for my principals, draw up the papers for signature; and to-morrow afternoon will see you, Mr. Freeman, the very richest man in your section!"

A growl like that of a baffled wild beast sounded close behind the speaker; and the head of John Holden towered over him, its dull eyes gleaming hate upon the men beyond. But the promoter passed hastily down the steps, and beyond hearing of the words:

"Yer ben't 'shamed, Phil Freeman, be yer, ter use with ther man ez hez ther wrong ov yer? Et don' mek no differ, do it, s'long ez yer sells yer lan', ef yer sells ther name ov yer gell, long ov it?"

"You old scoundrel! How dare you!" Freeman cried, starting toward Holden; but as Latham dragged him back, he went on fiercely: "You lying traitor! I half suspected you started those vile rumors about—"

"I hezn't need'd ter start nuthin, hez I?" Holden retorted, but seeming to speak with effort and pain.

"Et warn't need ter start wot all folk, 'cep'n' ye, cud see ov ther own eyes! Ef yer gell hezn't met no men ov nights—ef she hezn't rid 'long ov 'em, on ther same critter—axe thet uther rebul, ef John Holden be a-lyin'!"

Amazed—stunned by sudden wording of doubts and dread half-sleeping for years—Freeman let his hands drop at his sides helplessly, as he cried:

"Latham, for God's sake, speak! Say this slanderer lies, and let me drive his words—"

But Latham, pale and grave—with a world of grief and pity in his voice—stopped him:

"You *must* control yourself! This is no time, nor place. One chance word overheard, might spread these hideous rumors to public ears. *She* is the proper one to explain to you; there can be nothing known to me, which she will not confirm!"

Even as he spoke, he urged the unresisting farmer down the steps to the sharp turn at the landing below. But he answered no word; his gray head bowed upon his breast, his firm step grown unsteady. At the turning he raised his face, gray and drawn as with great age; the eyes dulled and dazed as though under stroke of a murderous bludgeon. The trembling lips could form no words; and, filled with pity unspeakable, Latham saw two great tears roll down the drawn cheeks.

"Go, Mr. Freeman!" he said. "I will go with you!"

Then the Alabamian made one supreme effort. With a shudder, he shook off Latham's touch, drew himself to full height and said hoarsely:

"I'll go—to *her*! If she says ye lie, both shall answer it with blood!"

He moved down the steps, as Latham gazed after him, with pity beyond words. But suddenly, he turned, rushing back toward Holden, with hands clinched, and eyes blazing with the old gladiator fire of battle.

"You lying traitor!" he cried with suppressed voice. "You traitor to country and race! I forgave you for trying to murder me, for spying—for lying about women! I never guessed, *then*, you coward cur! Now, if you don't unsay your filthy words, as God is above us, I'll tear them out of your throat!"

Quickly and desperately as he spoke, his voice was not raised; but its quick echo penetrated rooms close by, and some doors opened.

But Holden—still leaning motionless against the pillar at the stair-head—never answered by word, or sign. A strong contortion passed across his face; the green-red eyes were dull and fireless; the great chest rose and fell quickly. But no sound came from the drawn lips; and the great hand—quickly raised—pressed his own side fiercely.

"Speak! you liar!" Latham again cried. Intent upon his quarry, he took no note of men advancing; but drew back with twitching hands and eyes blazing as the tiger's, crouched to spring.

And then the tall form before him swayed slightly—suddenly lurched heavily sideways; and—as a great pine uprooted from the cliff's edge—John

Holden pitched down the stairway, headlong and striking the sharp stones as he went.

Hurrying men, at the top, saw Latham rush down the steps, bend over the prostrate man, and turn him on his back. The face was livid and the eyes closed; a thin, red stream trickling from the broad forehead, across the pinched features.

"He is badly hurt!" Latham called to the others clustering around. "Don't stand gaping there! Call a doctor—and a cab!"

And they quickly obeyed the accent of habitual command.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“HANK HEZ THER RIGHT!”

ON his narrow bed, in the dingy room of a cheap boarding-house of the “Northern Liberties,” lay stretched the lank, muscular frame of John Holden. But it might have been a corpse—save for the short, irregular breathing—so motionless were the gaunt, powerful limbs, so nerveless lay the great, brown fingers on the coverlet, in the light of the low turned lamp.

By the bedside sat the doctor, occasionally feeling the pulse; or turning the cover from the broad, hirsute breast, to bend his ear for pulsations of the heart. And opposite him stood Beverly Latham, looking gravely down upon the stricken giant.

“Pulse very little stronger, but more regular; heart beginning to act under the digitalis,” the man of medicine said, replacing the cover and returning his watch to its fob. “Rather a bad case, but he may pull through, this time. He must have the constitution of an ox in that frame.”

“Is it concussion of the brain?” Latham asked, with singular anxiety.

“Not a symptom,” the doctor replied confidently. “The fall did not hurt much; that cut on the fore-

head is but skin deep. The trouble seems with his heart, and of long standing. Is he subject to these turns?"

"I have no idea," the Virginian said. "The man is almost a stranger to me; I only saw him twice, years ago. It was accident"—he answered the other's look of surprise—"that I happened there, at the time. The clerks lost their heads; and common humanity suggested a doctor and a cab. Besides, I wished to question him, if he was not killed. Will he get well?"

"He will never be well." The doctor shook his head sagely. "He may get up again, and last for months. Much depends on the brain. I cannot diagnose that, while his stupor lasts. But he is apt to revive partly, even if the stroke be fatal."

"Will he be conscious?" Latham again asked, earnestly. "Able to answer questions?"

"Most probably; if it be only the heart, and not the brain involved. I hope to find him better when I come in the morning. Good-night."

Left alone, Latham still stood long and thoughtfully, gazing down on his now helpless enemy; memory moving a vivid-pictured panorama across his brain. And its every scene—mountain ride, quiet convalescence, hot charge of battle or perfumed glare of ball-room—showed out two figures, clear and sharp; two figures so different—yet so strangely bound together; a sweet faced, stately woman and this grim old mountaineer. Through every phase of his fateful acquaintance with Jen Freeman—to its very end, in Mrs. Dent's conservatory—Latham

re-lived the past; and thinking as intently and as bitterly as he did, still came wonder at the strange fatality that linked her for evil report or fair, with this man, whose tongue might already be silenced forever by the All-wise Hand.

Were it best for this to be so? he asked himself. Or might those still lips—did they speak, and truly—clear away the doubts that hung over her, whom he could not tear from his heart,—even while that heart cried aloud that she deserved no place in it?

But at last thought wearied, and he grew restless and impatient. For the sick man lay motionless; only the fitful breathing telling of wrestle of the iron constitution and its foe unseen. He turned to grasp the bell rope, when a faint murmur came from Holden's lips; and bending anxiously over him, Latham caught the gasps:

"Yes, Hank!—Et war all 'long ov my yoath. Yer hez ther right!—Yer paw'll do't, sho!"

The great, limp hand essayed to reach out, its fingers twitching convulsively; then the heavy lids unclosed and the dulled eyes stared upward an instant. But they closed again; and, with a deeper breath, the man seemed to sleep. The watcher promptly raised the heavy head and, dropping some fluid in a glass, poured it between the still lips. Holden lay quiet awhile; then opened his eyes heavily again, murmuring:

"He ben't gone, be he? Whar's Hank?"

"Hush; you must not talk," Latham answered quietly. "Try to sleep!"

But strong will mastered matter; and with fruitless effort to rise to his elbow, Holden felt feebly along the coverlet, searching for something.

"Hank war a-settin' yan, a-talkin' ter his paw," he moaned. "He 'low'd ez I hed n't ther right wen—"

Again the eyes closed heavily, as the feeble breath seemed to flicker and cease.

Latham took the long, muscular arm, anxiously touching the pulse and feeling for the heart beats.

"Do not talk; you must rest!" he said, not unkindly. But again the eyes opened; staring dully past him, as in effort at memory.

"He 'low'd ez I hed n't orter shot yer, at ther dancin'," he gasped; and, as in a lightning flash, the listener saw the log cabin, the shoeless dancers and his own attempted murder. "Hank 'low'd Lize hed ther right, wen she sed yer war a-friendin' him—thet ther gell war a-doin' her bes' fur Lize—wen—I lied, 'bout her!"

There was a long, dead pause. In it Latham could almost hear the thumping of his own heart, above the feeble gasps of the sufferer. Twice he essayed to caution the other to silence; twice anxious curiosity held the caution on his lips. What were this man's health—his life even!—weighed against a woman's reputation? So he only listened eagerly until Holden spoke again.

"But yer paw war doin' ther Lord's work, Hank, wen he lied 'gin ther sesesh! Ef he cud n't shoot fur ye, boy, yer paw cud kill 'nuther way! Hang John Holden fur thet? He war in ther Lord's han' an' he hain't heng, hez he?" He struggled to his elbow,

raising his right hand feebly; but it fell to his side and he sunk back on his pillow.

Latham poured some brandy in a glass, holding it to the other's lips; but he clinched his teeth, spluttering:

"I hezn't techt it sence she lef' me; and she'd know't soon, wen I jine her yan! Cum 'long, Hank; yer maw's a-callin' fur we'uns!" He was silent a moment; moving his lips restlessly. "Et don' mek no differ, boy. Yer paw war a-doin' fur yer sake; an' he hain't a-fearin, be he?"

Again the eyes opened slowly; fixing on the man beside him with steady stare.

"Do you know me, Holden?" Latham asked.

The man's brown hand passed feebly across his brow, before he replied slowly:

"I hain't like' ter furgit, be I? Cursid be ther war! But wen ther Lord forgives—" He paused a while; then went on: "I hain't never lied afore ther war! I tole yer thet, wen yer fus' cum a-huntin' Hank! An' sence, I war druv ter lyin' fur ther Lord's work! No, Hank!"—his eyes turned, as though addressing a palpable shape—"Yer paw knows yer hez ther right! He hain't a-lyin' no mo'. But he's smeat wearit, boy. He's a-goin fur yer maw!"

With a great gasp, he lay silent; so long and so motionless that Latham feared his soul had indeed fled; and, with it, the secret from which it so struggled to get free. But the pulse still responded to his touch; again the eyes opened wide, as Holden gasped eagerly:

"Whar's Phil Freeman? Whar's ther gell?" He tried vainly to rise; then moaned: "Et don' mek no differ, Hank; tha's boun' ter know at ther jedgment!"

Glancing at his watch, Latham again dropped digitalis in the glass. Holden swallowed it mechanically; seeming to sleep, for minutes that seemed hours to the anxious watcher. Then suddenly, Holden's eyes opened again and he moaned:

"Whar's Freeman an' ther gell? Hank 'lows I'm boun' ter tell 'em 'fore I go!"

"Do you know what you are asking?" Latham queried, eagerly. "Do you really want to see them?"

"Yer hain't mistuk, hez yer?" Holden whimpered. "Bring 'em yere, quick! Ef I do n' tell 'em, Hank 'ull go back!"

Quick decision is part of war's training. Latham glanced at his watch, prepared a dose of medicine; then moved rapidly down stairs. Brief instruction sufficed to the landlady's husband, keeping watch in the stuffy dining room below. Then the Virginian rushed to the street; luckily caught an empty cab; and, urging the driver to best speed, was soon at Mrs. Craig's door. To his joy, the hall lamp still burned; and his loud peal on the bell was answered by Mr. Freeman.

"You are doubtless surprised, sir," Latham cried, before the farmer could speak. "But Holden is ill; probably dying. He insists upon seeing you and—your daughter—at once."

"I am surprised, lieutenant," Freeman answered, bluntly. "After this morning, I scarcely expected to see you here. If that old traitor has more lies—"

"He will speak truth now," Latham answered; promptly stepping before the farmer's indecision and taking command. "Where is Miss Freeman?"

"With Mrs. Craig, at the Spanish minister's ball," the father answered. "Lieutenant, I tried to find words to speak to my child; but when I saw her to-day, after all these years—so changed and grand—so full of hope and joy, to see her father again—damn it! sir, I couldn't speak. She knows nothing of all this; and, were she here, she shouldn't go to listen to that old liar! Good-night, sir!"

Latham stood quietly in the open door, though his face flushed under the old man's blunt speech.

"Mr. Freeman, this is no time for false delicacy," he said firmly. "I believe Holden means to speak the truth. It is your duty to me—to your daughter—to hear him. An hour hence may be too late!"

"But Jen is not here." The farmer hesitated before the vehement common sense of the younger man.

"Take my cab and go for her. Remember, sir, there is no time to waste!"

"I'll do it!" was the abrupt reply; and a rapid drive back brought them to the embassy. Mr. Freeman entered, quickly returning with Jen; her gleaming neck and arms, and wealth of coiled hair, scarce half concealed by her light opera cloak. She gave Latham the merest inclination of her haughty head; and, as she stepped aside, her father helped her into the cab. So he said:

"The driver knows the house; I will follow in another cab, Mr. Freeman!"

"No, papa! I prefer this—gentleman to go with us," Jen said, quickly. "Colonel Latham must hear every word John Holden says to me!"

Without one word, Latham mounted by the driver; urging him again to haste; and the strangely reunited trio sped over the asphalt on their strange mission.

Great was the wonder of the landlady's husband, when the vision of a beautiful woman, in full ball dress, met the eyes he raised to the opening door.

Holden was sleeping seemingly, the dim lamp and odor of drugs contrasting strangely with the brilliant scene the woman had just left. But, as Latham dismissed the watcher, she moved quietly to the bedside, and looked pityingly down upon her old enemy. A slight shudder moved her shapely shoulders; and the flowers on her bosom shook with one long-drawn sigh. Then she slipped her gloved hand into her father's; standing pale and quiet, until Holden moved again, muttering. Then, his opening eyes fell upon the woman's face, as though expecting to find it there; and he spoke, more easily than before:

"Yer hez n't 'low'd I war gone, hez yer?" he said. "I war waitin' tell yer cum, Phil Freeman; but I want yer gell, too!"

"I am here, Mr. Holden," Jen said, quietly; a world of pity in her voice, and in the eyes that took in all that wreck of prideful power.

"Yer ben't a-foolin', be yer? No; ther hain't no voice like yourn! Phil Freeman, we 'uns hez know'd

'nuther nigh ter forty year Sence ther war, I hez bin plum sot 'gin yer; fur I 'low ez I hed ther right. But he war yere, jes' now—Hank war—"

"Who?" Jen Freeman glanced around involuntarily.

"Hank, my boy. An' he 'low'd ez I shud tell yer thet I lied, a-thinkin' I war a-doin ther Lord's work."

He dropped back on his pillow, panting; and Latham, seizing his wrist anxiously, felt the pulse almost stop. He seized the glass of brandy.

"Take this, Holden! You must!"

The grim invalid gulped the liquor.

"Et don' mek no differ now, do it? Thet ben't a-brekin' no yoaths, w'en I'm a-goin' ter jine her! I ben't a lyin' now, Phil Freeman; I war 'gin yer all 'long. W'en Hank rid off ter jine, 'gin his paw's will, it war hard. W'en he 'low'd he war sot ter go back, thet war harder yit; an' w'en he war kilt—" He rose to his elbow, striving to raise his right hand; but fell back, gasping a moment, before he added: "Then I swar my yoath ter Gawd, an' kep 't ther bes' I cud! Lize know'd 't—"

"She did!" Jen broke in. "She came to warn me the first night you shot; that midnight. But Mr. Latham came and—"

"Thank God!—At last!" Even through that solemn scene, the deep tremor in Latham's voice fell strong and solemn as a vow; and his eyes sought hers with infinite pleading for pardon in them. But Jen went on gravely, though her voice shook:

"And she told me you led the Yankees to Mr. Latham's hiding, the night she walked with me to

warn him! But that is past, and God forgives you!"

As she spoke, Freeman's eyes stared at her, as though not hearing aright; but they met Latham's—bravely turned to him; a great hope in them now—and the father's arm stole about her, with a tenderness that paid her for many a struggle gone.

"I ble've He do forgi'e 't all," the sick man answered. "Et war dun fur His work, w'en I war blin', gell! I lied 'gin yer, w'en yer led Forres' crost ther crik; I lied ter yer yung man, 'bout ther Yank and ther Gadsding boy a-courtin'!"

Again he paused for breath. Again Latham's eyes met Jen Freeman's; but, this time, hers sought his. And in them was something that made him feel more humble and more contrite, in the gleam of her great forgiveness!

"I'm near dun'," Holden gasped more feebly. "I war plum sot, w'en I war blin'. W'en a man ar' sot, he ar' sot all ter wunst! But Hank 'lows I hain't got ther right—an'—ter morrer—"

His eyes closed wearily. Latham again put the brandy to his lips; very gently now. But Holden shook his head weakly:

"I hain't a-needin' no mo'. But I 'low I'm smeat wearit, an' I kin sleep quiet, now."

He closed his eyes awhile. Then they opened wide, fixed full on Jen's.

"I 'low yer hez forgi'en me, gell!" he said, softly. "An' yer hez ther right ter do 't, ez I war a-workin' blin' fur ther Lord! Gi'e me yer han', gell!"

Feebly he reached out his brown, knotted left hand; and the girl—impulsively tearing the long glove from her rounded arm—placed her slim, white fingers in it. More feebly still, he strove to stretch his other hand to Latham.

“Kin yer ’low yer hez ther right ter gi’e me yer han’, too, yung soljer?” he asked.

“May God forgive you as wholly as I do!” Latham answered gravely; and very gently his strong hand lifted the hard one of his old foe.

Then, with quick access of strength, John Holden sat bolt upright; his face calm, and his eyes glowing with their old fire. And—so suddenly that neither man nor woman could suspect his purpose—he brought their hands together; holding them close, with fevered strength, as he spoke, in his old, deep voice:

“Them ez ther Lord hez jined—no man shell hinder!”

As suddenly as he had risen, he fell back; carrying the soldier’s hand—still resting on the fair one of the girl—close on his heart. Then his grasp relaxed; and, as two burning faces raised bravely to each other, the eyes of both spoke a solemn “Amen!” to that strange betrothal sacrament!

No one broke the silence; but two pairs of moist eyes sought those of Philip Freeman. They were full of tears; but the love in them was as of a benediction.

“I hez dun ther Lord’s work ter ther las’!” John Holden whispered, very low. “I be plum wearit; lem’ me sleep!”

He closed his eyes quietly, breathing as easily and softly as a child; and—when certain that he slept—the three moved to the window, speaking in whispers that were full freighted with present peace and future hope. But still the sick man slept; and—after two hours, that had not moved with leaden feet for him—Latham pointed to the east.

“The dawn of a new day, my darling!” he whispered to Jen. “And, oh! what a different day!”

“We are both better for what we have suffered,” she answered, with her eyes on his. “Truly Holden has done the Lord’s work. His ways are the best!”

“May He forgive, as we do!” Latham answered. “But, poor old fellow! I have forgotten his medicine!”

He dropped the liquid and moved softly to the bedside. Very gently he touched the forehead of the quiet sleeper.

It was icy cold. The laboring heart, that was “plum wearit,” had ceased its work.

John Holden had gone “ter jine” her—and Hank!

THE END.

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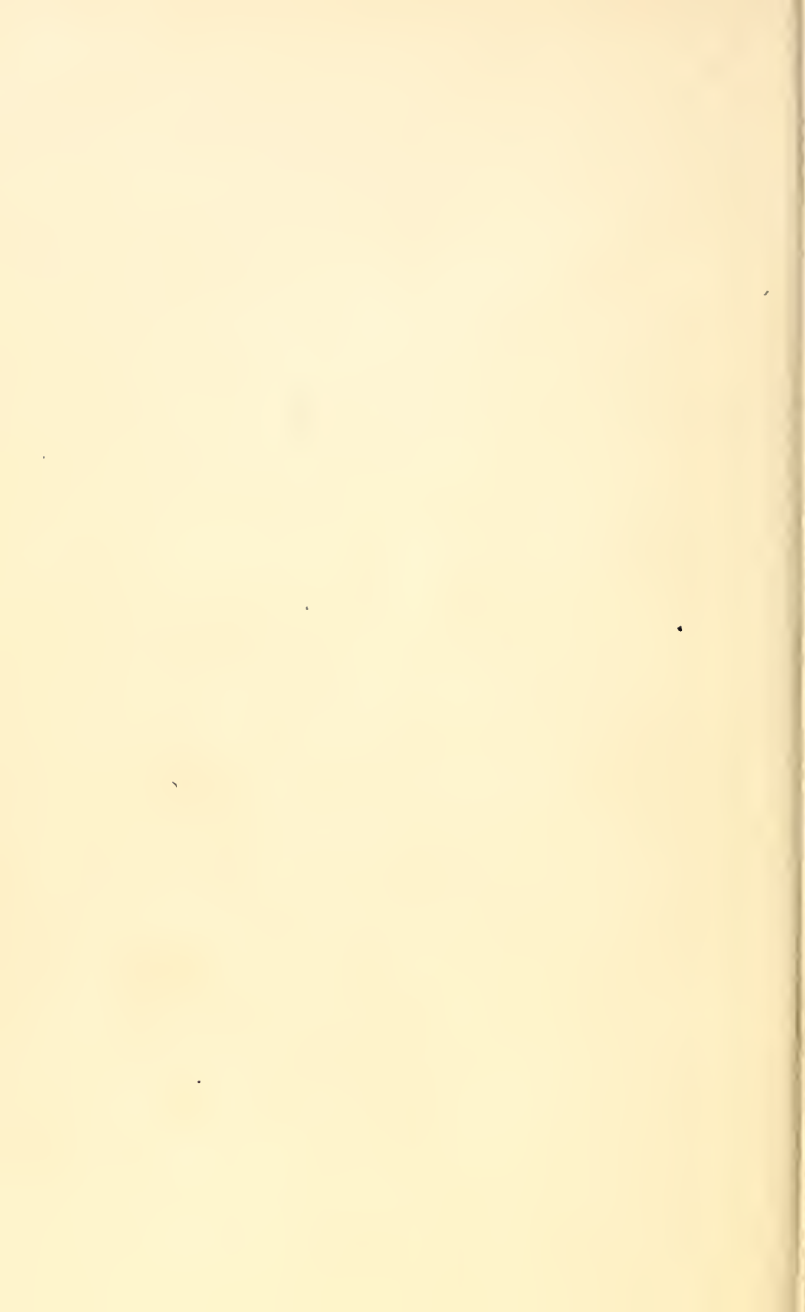
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